The Effect of Instagram on Appearance, Self-esteem, and Social Approval

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Introduction

This enhancement was done as an extension of a study we conducted in the Psychology of Social Media course with Dr. Bjornsen. In order to expand our sample, we collected a second round of data this semester, enlarging our sample size from 126 to 200. We also expanded the number of previous studies we used for comparisons with our results, including studies from a broader range of cultures.

Studies from other cultures have examined Instagram use and ratings of appearance, self-esteem, and social approval. A study from the Middle East reported evidence of individuals altering their photos for Instagram when concerned about appearance and social approval (Al-Kandari, Al-Sumait & Al-Hunaiyyan, 2017). A similar study from Turkey found a correlation between Instagram use and problematic social media use, including creating a false, more appealing presentation of oneself (Kircaburun, Alhabash, Tosuntaş, & Griffiths, 2018).

Multiple studies from other countries also noted a change in self-esteem among survey respondents (both positive and negative) with Instagram Use (Mullins, 2017) and general social media use (Widjajanta, Hadi Senen, Masharyono, Lisnawati, & Putri Anggraeni, 2018). Both studies found a different response of self-esteem (positive or negative) based upon how social media was used by the individual. As noted by the study conducted in Turkey, social media has the ability to increase self-esteem if used in a positive manner (Widjajanta et al, 2018).
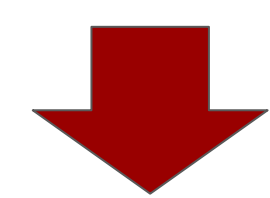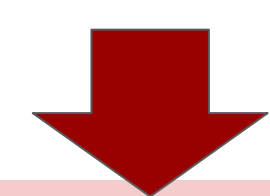
Online Survey

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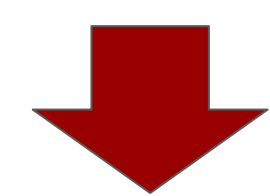
Age range = 18-57 (M_{age} = 22.32)	80.5% Female (n = 161) 19.5% Male (n = 39)

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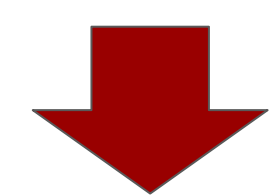
Data Analysis

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Sex comparisons

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Regression analyses

Method

Our survey included measures of social media addiction (Andreassen et al., 2016), negative emotionality (and its components anxiety, depression, emotional volatility; Soto & John, 2017), narcissism (Jones & Paulhus, 2014) as well as nine original items measuring the effects of Instagram use on self-identified attractiveness, feelings, and likeability. The study also included demographic questions asking about the ethnicity, location, age, and sex of respondents, as well as time spent using various social media apps. We collected data using an online questionnaire that was shared via Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook as well as word of mouth.

Once our data were collected, independent-samples *t*-tests examined sex differences on our Instagram effects items, and regression analysis explored relations between Instagram use and social media addiction, negative emotionality, and narcissism.

Results

Both males and females spent an average of 83 minutes per day using Instagram. Males and females also did not differ significantly on average daily use of Snapchat, Twitter, TikTok, Youtube, texting, or talking on their phone. Females reported significantly higher daily use of Facebook (45 minutes on average compared to 23 minutes on average for males).

Females reported significantly higher levels on our original Instagram effects items 1 - 8. Further, females scored significantly higher on negative emotionality (and its subscales) and social media addiction, while males scored significantly higher on narcissism. Given these sex differences, regression analyses were run separately for males and females predicting Instagram effects items. Items are presented below with personality traits that significantly predicted the items, along with their standardized beta weights, coefficients that indicate the strength of association between the predictor and outcome variables.

Attractiveness items:
1. Using Instagram makes me feel like other people are more attractive than I am.
   Males: Emotional volatility .60
   Females: Social media addiction .25, Anxiety .21

2. Because of posts I see, I have changed my appearance in my Instagram posts.
   Males: Emotional volatility .41
   Females: Social media addiction .35, Emotional volatility .22

3. After changing my appearance in my Instagram posts, I feel better about how I look.
   Males: Social media addiction .36
   Females: Social media addiction .35, Narcissism .20

Feelings items:
4. Using Instagram makes me feel dissatisfied or unhappy with myself.
   Males: Depression .47
   Females: Social media addiction .42, Depression .18

5. Because of Instagram posts I see, I have changed my posts in order to feel better about myself.
   Males: Emotional volatility .49
   Females: Social media addiction .40, Anxiety .19

6. After changing what I post on Instagram, I feel better about myself.
   Males: Depression .36
   Females: Social media addiction .31

Likeability items:
7. Using Instagram makes me feel like people don't like me as much as they like others.
   Males: Depression .61
   Females: Depression .27, Social media addiction .27

8. Because of what I've seen on Instagram, I post things to gain more approval from others.
   Males: Emotional volatility .34
   Females: Social media addiction .39

9. After changing what I post on Instagram, people seem to like me more.
   Males: Depression .33
   Females: Social media addiction .18

Discussion

While males and females did not differ in average time spent using Instagram, females reported consistently stronger effects of Instagram use on their self-concept, as reflected in scores on items 1-8. We believe this difference may be due to the fact that females may experience more criticism or scrutiny (on social media and in real life) regarding their appearance and therefore feel stronger pressure to alter their appearance. It may also be true that females are more sensitive to others' reactions to their Instagram posts and social media image. It is possible that females spend more time on Instagram focused on their own presence and feedback about themselves, related to not only physical appearance but also how they feel about themselves and whether others like them. In contrast, males may focus more on others' profiles rather than their own.

Females reported higher levels of all three facets of negative emotionality and social media addiction, and males reported higher levels of narcissism. These differences tend to concur with previous research on social media use, emotional difficulties, and personality traits.

Instagram effects items were predicted in different ways by personality traits for males and females. There was a noticeable pattern for Instagram effects on self-concept to be explained by emotional volatility and depression for males, and by social media addiction for females.

Our data suggest that males who reported higher levels of concerns over their Instagram presence also had higher levels of emotional volatility and depression. It may be that males who are prone to higher levels of these traits would be more concerned about their social media presence, perhaps use Instagram in order to enhance their self-concept.

Females' levels of concern with their Instagram presence were strongly related to levels of social media addiction. We believe that social media addiction may contribute to an obsession with one's appearance and social media image, thus increasing the motivation to use Instagram to enhance one's presence. We believe that social media plays a key role in creating a context in which physical flaws are magnified, and encourages comparison with others. Because of this, as well as the new technology available to change one's appearance, females who already have self-image concerns may spend more time on social media, specifically Instagram, to enhance their online persona.

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