



Undergraduate Review

Volume 13

Article 13

2017

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Recommended Citation

Gallinari, Elizabeth (2017). “Likes” for Self-Love? The Effects of Social Media on Self-Perception. *Undergraduate Review*, 13, 100-105.
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev/vol13/iss1/13

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“Likes” for Self-Love? The Effects of Social Media on Self-Perception

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Abstract

Social comparison theory describes how people self-evaluate themselves based on social comparisons to others. The current research investigated whether receiving more “likes” on social media than someone else will cause women to feel better about themselves, whereas receiving fewer “likes” will cause them to feel worse. Previous research has shown that social comparisons using social media, specifically Facebook, does affect levels of self-worth. Research regarding Instagram is limited, which is why it is the focus of this current research. The study included 124 participants, all of whom were women aged 18 to 25. The study consisted of two conditions featuring a manipulated Instagram post. After exposure to the manipulated post, the participants were asked to view a recent post on their Instagram and note the number of “likes,” which was intended to create a social comparison. The participants completed the State Self-Esteem scale to measure feelings of self-esteem. The results showed that comparing “likes” on Instagram did not signifi-

cantly affect levels of self-esteem. There was a small, positive correlational relationship found between the participants’ own number of “likes” and their levels of appearance self-esteem.

Introduction

Humans are social creatures by nature. As social creatures, comparison to others is inevitable. People use social comparisons to validate their own lives, sometimes unknowingly. Comparing the self with others is a pervasive social phenomenon, as stated by Suls, Martin, and Wheeler (2002), and is very prevalent in society. Social comparison theory encompasses the idea that individuals have a drive to gain accurate self-evaluations about themselves through the comparison to similar others. With the emergence of so many different types of social media, platforms for social comparison are continuing to expand. Instead of just being able to compare oneself to a person standing in the same room, there are now many social media outlets to achieve such comparison with millions of people.

Social comparison can affect individuals in varying ways. The downward comparison theory, sometimes known as the self-enhancement motive, claims comparisons to someone who is less fortunate will lead to a boost in well-being, whereas an upward comparison to those better off can reduce well-being (Suls et al., 2002). The self-improvement motive supports the opposing idea; if one believes change is possible, then an upward comparison can provide inspiration and a downward comparison can cause dismay. The main focus of this current study is the downward comparison theory. Based on this concept, as well as past evidence, it is predicted that getting more “likes” than someone

else will cause positive feelings of self-worth, while getting fewer “likes” will cause negative feelings of self-worth. A “like” occurs when an individual communicates their approval of a post on social media, usually via a thumbs up or a heart icon. There have been quite a few studies conducted regarding the relationship between social media and social comparison theory that support this prediction. Facebook is a perfect environment for social comparison. Vogel, Roberts, and Eckles (2014) revealed that viewing social media profiles with positive content was associated with poorer state self-esteem. The evidence provided showed that these social comparisons were involved in the relationship between Facebook use and well-being.

Individual differences can also affect the impact of social media interactions. People who use Facebook very often tend to have lower trait self-esteem (Vogel et al., 2014). De Vries and Kühne (2015) examined how individual levels of happiness stimulate the levels of social comparison. People who are already unhappy seem to experience more negative social comparison and, in turn, experience more negative self-perception. An individual’s level of social comparison orientation, the tendency to compare oneself to others, can impact how Facebook affects their self-perception. Research done by Vogel et al. (2015) showed that participants high in social comparison orientation seek out social comparisons on social media.

Facebook, as well as other social media platforms, has become common in everyday life, and self-perception can be influenced by all of the different types of social connections possible. Previous research has shown that the number of friends on Facebook can also affect

an individual’s levels of perceived social support. Research completed by Kim and Lee (2011) revealed that the number of Facebook friends had a positive association with subjective well-being as well as perceived social support. Results of other studies conducted by Burrow and Rainone (2017) have suggested that receiving a greater number of “likes” reliably predicted greater self-esteem. The two researchers also based their examinations on the sociometer theory, which supports the idea that self-esteem is calibrated based on inclusion or rejection within a social environment. Facebook’s like button can help fuel this sense of inclusion or rejection, since others can choose to like or ignore a post.

For the present study, the examination focused on the idea that receiving more “likes” than someone else will cause women to feel better about themselves, while receiving fewer “likes” than someone else will cause women to feel worse about themselves. Based on previous research, Facebook interaction has led to feelings of low self-worth and low self-perception (de Vries & Kühne, 2015). In order to test the hypothesis, a research study involving female participants who regularly use the social media platform, Instagram, was conducted. The participants were split into two control groups and each group shown a manipulated Instagram photo post; one featuring many “likes” and one with a few “likes”. The participants were then asked some questions regarding the manipulated photo. After exposure to the manipulated photo, the participants were asked to view their own most recent photo on Instagram and record the number of “likes,” as well as answer some questions. Following this observation, participants completed the State Self-Esteem Scale to assess self-esteem levels, as well as demographic information.

Method

Participants

One hundred and sixty participants were initially recruited through convenience sampling through the social networking site Facebook, as well as email requests. All participants were females between the ages of 18 and 25 with an Instagram account. Four were removed because they did not fit the age criteria. Twenty-eight were removed because they did not have a recent “selfie” post in Instagram, which was necessary for comparison reasons. A selfie is a photo taken by oneself, usually through the front facing camera on a smart phone. Three more participants were removed because they incorrectly answered the number of “likes” question regarding the manipulated post and one more was removed because she did not answer the question at all. The total participant count for this study was 124 females. The majority of participants, 87.9%, reported their ethnicity as Caucasian, 3.2% as African-American, 4% as Hispanic, and 1.6% as Asian. The remaining 3.2% specified as other ethnicities.

Materials

To create a social comparison environment, the participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: High “Likes” and Low “Likes.” Both groups were presented with a mock Instagram selfie post. The posts were identical for both groups with the exception of the number of “likes”. The High “Likes” photo had 153 “likes,” and the Low “Likes” photo had seven “likes.” These numbers were chosen after careful consideration and deemed to be more than average and less than average, thus intending to create an environment for social comparison.

Measures

To measure the effects of social comparison on participant’s self-perception, participants were surveyed after the manipulated Instagram post. Self-esteem was measured using the State Self-Esteem Scale, a 20-item scale that measures self-worth by measuring three components of self-esteem: performance self-esteem, social self-esteem, and appearance self-esteem (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991). Opinions of self-worth were measured using 5-point scale format ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely) on statements such as “I feel confident in my abilities,” “I feel displeased with myself” and “I feel concerned about the impression I am making.”

Procedure

Participants clicked the link for an Instagram Survey and were directed to an external website, which presented them with an explanation of informed consent. After the participants gave their consent, the study began with exposure to the manipulated photo described above. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions. After viewing the manipulated Instagram post, the participants answered a series of questions, such as the number of “likes” and the background of the photo. Participants were then asked to view their most recent selfie post on Instagram and asked to answer another set of questions regarding their own post. After viewing both the manipulated post and their own post, the participants completed the State Self-Esteem Scale to assess their current state of self-perception. The participants finished with a few demographic questions, before reading a debriefing statement which thanked them for their participation and concluded the study.

Results

In order to test whether comparing “likes” on Instagram affected women’s self-esteem, an independent-sample *t*-test was conducted. The analysis revealed that comparing “likes” on Instagram did not significantly affect social self-esteem (Low “Likes”: $M = 3.61$, $SD = .80$; High “Likes”: $M = 3.39$, $SD = .92$), $t(122) = 1.41$, $p = .16$. Another independent-sample *t*-test was performed and the analysis revealed that comparing “likes” on Instagram did not significantly affect performance self-esteem (Low “Likes”: $M = 3.67$, $SD = .70$; High “Likes”: $M = 3.74$, $SD = .74$) $t(122) = -.51$, $p = .61$. A third independent-sample *t*-test was performed and the analysis revealed that comparing “likes” on Instagram did not significantly affect appearance self-esteem (Low “Likes”: $M = 3.03$, $SD = .66$; High “Likes”: $M = 3.13$, $SD = .94$), $t(122) = -.65$, $p = .51$.

In order to test whether the number of “likes” on their own post was linked to self-esteem levels, a Pearson’s correlation test was conducted. The analysis revealed a small, positive correlational relationship between number of “likes” and appearance self-esteem, $r(122) = .22$, $p = .01$.

Discussion

The current study focused on how social comparison using social media can affect self-esteem and self-perception levels. The hypothesis, which was that receiving more “likes” than someone else will cause women to feel better about themselves, while receiving fewer “likes” will cause women to feel worse, was not supported. The results from the State Self-Esteem scale indicate the number of “likes” on the manipulated Instagram post did not significantly alter levels of social,

performance, or appearance self-esteem. The current study did find a small, positive correlation between the number of “likes” on the participants’ own posts and their level of appearance self-esteem. This correlational data shows there is a small, positive relationship between how many “likes” one receives on their own posts and their feelings of self-worth, meaning the participants who received more “likes” on their own photo reported higher feelings of self-worth. It is unknown whether the cause might be social comparison to the number of “likes” on others’ posts to their own.

The findings from the current study revealed that comparing “likes” on Instagram to someone else does not sway levels of self-esteem. Burrow and Rainone (2017) suggested that the greater the number of “likes,” the greater level of self-worth and self-esteem, which is similar to the correlational findings from the current study. A good portion of the previous research focused on the effects of social comparison using Facebook, which includes other forms of online social interaction other than just the “like” option. The different choices, such as “love”, “sad”, “angry” and “wow”, may have an effect on self-perception, since there are more features available. Further research should be conducted regarding Instagram and the effect it has on self-worth. There is the possibility that “likes” are not the main cause for the fluctuation in self-esteem, and there could be another source of social media interaction that is responsible.

There were a few limitations found for the current study. One major limitation in the current study could be that the number of “likes” for the High “Likes” post was not high enough. About twenty participants stated their own posts had more than 153 “likes”, which was

the manipulated number for the High “Likes” post. The manipulation in the High “Likes” condition may have been too normal and did not provide enough of a difference for an upward comparison. Another limitation may be that the manipulated photo was of a stranger and the participants did not consider the female in the photo similar enough to create a social comparison. Similarity plays a sizable part in social comparison because people tend to compare themselves to those whom they believe most resemble themselves (Suls et al., 2002). A third limitation could be the use of a self-report survey measure. Participants may not be truthful when self-reporting about themselves, which could alter the accuracy of the data. Lastly, another limitation could be the possibility that the questions asked were too subtle and did not create enough of a comparison environment for the participant to have an upward or downward comparison reaction.

Future research should broaden the demographic group to include those slightly older and younger, as well as from different areas. Demographically, the sampling method for this current study was quite shallow because of the short time span available. A larger, more representative sample may alter the findings in further research. Future research could also focus on how social media affects those who have lower self-esteem or suffer from mood disorders that may affect their self-perception. Individual differences may affect how social media interactions impact self-perception. De Vries and Kühne (2015) looked at how individual levels of happiness can influence social comparison, so it would be very interesting to see how that may affect social comparison through social media outlets.

Overall, this study did not support the hypothesis which claimed that women who receive more “likes” than someone else will experience feelings of higher self-esteem, whereas those who receive fewer “likes” experience feelings of lowered self-esteem. Suls, Martin, and Wheeler (2002) declared that comparing the self with others is a widespread social phenomenon and is becoming more prevalent in society today through the use of social media. It is plausible that the number of “likes” on a photo or post may not be what creates social comparison, but possibly another aspect of social media that has yet to be examined further.

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About the Author



Elizabeth Gallinari is majoring in Psychology and plans to graduate in the spring of 2018. Her research project was completed for her research methods class, under the mentorship of Dr. Laura Ramsey (Psychology). After graduating from Bridgewater State University, she plans to pursue a doctorate in Quantitative Psychology.