Social Media and Faking One's Looks Online

A look at the effect on women's body image of photographs showing real people versus their altered selves.

August 30, 2021 By Kate Ferguson

On social media appearance is everything. This means people want to post only perfect images, which sometimes leads them to alter their photos, a phenomenon Instagram users call out via posts featuring side-by-side photographs labeled to show the idealized image versus the reality. Now, study findings published in the journal New Media & Society show that these comparisons can help reduce the dissatisfaction with their bodies women often experience when using Instagram.

For the study, the first of its kind, researchers picked participants at random from among 305 women ages 18 to 30. (An estimated 58% of Instagram users in the United States are female, and people ages 18 to 29 make up 71% of U.S. adults who say they have ever used the site.) Investigators asked participants to review three sets of 15 images. One set consisted of paired altered versus reality photos of a woman placed side by side for the purpose of comparison; another contained only the idealized photo; and the last consisted of only unaltered photos. (The photos were of the same woman in the same settings.) Because Instagram focuses exclusively on the posting and sharing of photos, investigators limited their study to this platform.

Scientists noted that an extensive body of research confirms that exposure to idealized images of women in fashion magazines and on TV has a detrimental effect on women's body image. In addition, researchers also noted that inquiries show similar effects occur when women view photos of their peers posted on social media.

Researchers assessed women's dissatisfaction with their weight and appearance both before they viewed the Instagram images and after. Next, scientists checked how extensively women compared their overall appearance as well as specific body parts with other women's while reviewing the pictures.

In addition, researchers asked participants to rate the women in the images for realism, thinness and attractiveness. Last, scientists asked the participants whether they believed the women in the photos were trying to send some sort of message. (The answer required was either yes or no.)

Results showed that when individuals perused the Instagram versus reality photos, they were much less dissatisfied overall with the appearance of their own bodies relative to the near perfection of the idealized images.

Despite these benefits, however, scientists stressed that more research is needed to evaluate the long-term effects on women's body image of this relatively new trend juxtaposing idealized and realistic photos of the same person for comparison.

Many studies have explored the effects of body image primarily on American women. Read "Black Women and Body Image" for findings about how African-American women feel about their weight, shape, skin and hair.

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