Social Media and Body Image in Young Women: Examining the Positive and Negative Role of Appearance-focused Activities

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Declaration

CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I, Rachel Cohen, declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy (Clinical Psychology), in the Graduate School of Health at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

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Format of Thesis

This thesis is presented for examination as a thesis by compilation and comprises a combination of chapters and published works. The thesis includes a general introduction (Chapter 1) to establish context, review the relevant literature, and outline the aims of this thesis. This is followed by five distinct papers (Chapters 2-6) with the inclusion of a preamble to each chapter to establish the relationship between each paper. Each of the five papers presented in this thesis have already been published in peer-reviewed journals and incorporate their own introduction, methods, results, discussion, and references. Finally, the thesis concludes with a general discussion (Chapter 7), which synthesises the main findings, conclusions, and implications of this thesis as a whole, as well as the limitations and directions for future research.

Publication and Dissemination of Research Findings

The studies reported in this thesis have been published in peer-reviewed journals, presented at conference proceedings, and communicated to the public through various media channels as outlined below:

Peer-Reviewed Journal Articles

Cohen, R., Newton-John, T., & Slater, A. (2017). The relationship between Facebook and Instagram appearance-focused activities and body image concerns in young women. *Body Image*, *23*, 183-187. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2017.10.002

Cohen, R., Newton-John, T., & Slater, A. (2018). 'Selfie'-objectification: The role of selfies in self-objectification and disordered eating in young women. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 79, 68-74. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.10.027

Cohen, R., Fardouly, J., Newton-John, T., & Slater, A. (2019). #BoPo on Instagram: An experimental investigation of the effects of viewing body positive content on young women's mood and body image. *New Media & Society*, *21*, 1546-1564. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819826530

Cohen, R., Irwin, L., Newton-John, T., & Slater, A. (2019). #bodypositivity: A content analysis of body positive accounts on Instagram. *Body Image, 29*, 47-57. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2019.02.007

Cohen, R., Newton-John, T., & Slater, A. (in press). The case for body positivity on social media: Perspectives on current advances and future directions. *Journal of Health Psychology*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105320912450

Conference Presentations

Cohen, R., Newton-John, T., & Slater, A. 'Selfie'-objectification: The role of selfies in self-objectification and disordered eating in young women. Poster session

presented at: Body Image & Related Disorders (BIRD) Conference; 3 November 2017; Melbourne, Aus.

Cohen, R., Fardouly, F., Newton-John., & Slater, A. Appearance-focused social media use and body image in young women: the role of body positive social media. Paper presented at: Appearance Matters 8 Conference; 12-14 June 2018; Bath, UK.

Research Dissemination in the Public Arena

Radio Interview with 2SER-FM, April 2017: https://2ser.com/social-media-body-image-dissatisfaction/

Article in Buzzfeed UK, October 2017: https://www.buzzfeed.com/kellyoakes/how-selfies-could-be-a-sign-that-someone-is-struggling-with

Article in Stuff.co.nz (Fairfax Digital), January 2018: https://www.stuff.co.nz/life-style/well-good/teach-me/99945975/think-that-selfie-is-real-think-again

Article in Buzzfeed Aus, August 2018: https://www.buzzfeed.com/elfyscott/heres-how-instagram-affects-our-psychology-according-to

Podcast Interview with Think: Digital Futures (2SER Radio), October 2018: https://player.whooshkaa.com/episode/?id=290815

Video Interview with Buzzfeed Aus, December 2018: https://youtu.be/i2QEylzTyqs

Article in The Conversation, March 2019: https://theconversation.com/women-can-build-positive-body-image-by-controlling-what-they-view-on-social-media-113041

Radio Interview with 2SER-FM, March, 2019: https://2ser.com/body-positivity-soars-on-instagram/

Article in Lorna Jane, March, 2019: https://www.movenourishbelieve.com/believe/the-psychological-social-media/

Article in the Daily Telegraph, April 2019:

https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/lifestyle/hollywood-stars-ditching-fad-diets-and-loving-themselves-for-who-they-are/news-story/1f9bd52ef6c42e7ff20d920c73013555

Radio Interview with ABC Radio National, January 2020:

https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/lifematters/challenging-body-shaming-attitudes/11889906

Table of Contents

Thesis Overview

Media has been identified as an important contributing factor to the development of body image concerns and disordered eating. Recent research demonstrates a relationship between time spent on social networking sites (SNS) and body image concerns. However, less is known about which aspects of SNS use are most relevant. This program of research used a mixed-methods approach to examine the specific aspects of SNS that are related to body image issues and disordered eating in young women, as well as to explore potential aspects of SNS that may promote positive body image.

Correlational studies (Papers 1 and 2) found that appearance-focused SNS use, rather than overall SNS use, was related to body image concerns in young women. Specifically, greater engagement in photo activities on Facebook, following appearance-focused accounts on Instagram (Paper 1), and greater investment in 'selfie' activities (Paper 2), were associated with body image concerns and eating disorder symptomatology. Moreover, self-objectification was found to moderate the relationship between photo investment and bulimia symptomatology (Paper 2).

In an experimental study (Paper 3), brief exposure to body positive posts on Instagram was associated with improvements in young women's positive body image, relative to thin-ideal and appearance-neutral posts. However, both thin-ideal and body-positive posts were associated with increased self-objectification relative to appearance-neutral posts. Furthermore, participants showed favourable attitudes towards body positive accounts with the majority being willing to follow them in the future.

A content analysis of popular body positive accounts on Instagram (Paper 4) found that body positive imagery typically depicted a broad range of body sizes and appearances. Additionally, while a proportion of posts were appearance-focused, the

majority of posts conveyed messages aligned with theoretical definitions of positive body image.

Finally, Paper 5 discussed the potential benefits and disadvantages of 'body positivity' on social media in light of pop-cultural criticism, positive body image theory, and the available research. A case was made in support of this emerging content, as well as recommendations for future research.

Overall, the findings of this thesis contribute to the existing body of research on the effects of social media on young women's body image by clarifying the role of specific aspects of SNS use that may be most harmful and beneficial in order to provide best practice guidelines and prevention efforts for social media users who may be at risk of body image issues. Similarly, the results provide further support for the application of sociocultural theory of body image disturbance, objectification theory, and positive body image theory to the social media environment.