Social media and online self-presentation: Effects on how we see ourselves and our bodies

de Vries, D.A.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

and

Dissertation Outline
Describe yourself in three words. Do you like what you see in the mirror? What would you change about yourself if you could change one thing? Your answers to these commonly asked questions give away a great deal of information about how you see yourself and your body. Your responses will tell which characteristics of yourself you focus on most and whether you evaluate these characteristics positively or negatively. These thoughts and feelings about the self are referred to as self-views (Swann, Chang-Sneider, & McLarty, 2007). Research has shown that certain self-views, such as an excessive focus on certain attributes of the self, such as physical appearance, as well as negative evaluations of these attributes adversely impact general well-being and mental health (e.g., Cattarin & Thompson, 1994; Impett, Henson, Breines, Schooler, & Tolman, 2011; Mond, Van den Berg, Boutelle, Hannan, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2011). It is for this reason that academics, but also (mental) health professionals, parents, and teachers, try to understand what shapes self-views.

One potential influence on self-views is the media (Aubrey, 2006; Clay, Vignoles, & Dittmar, 2005; Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). Research on the effects of media on self-views has typically focused on mass media, such as magazines and TV programs that focus on the importance of looking physically attractive and portray unattainable appearance ideals (e.g., Aubrey, 2006; Grabe et al., 2008; Groesz, et al., 2002). In the past twenty years, however, the media landscape has changed considerably, largely due to the dramatic increase of internet-based communication. A particularly important change is the rise of social media. Social media, such as social network sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) and dating sites, are internet-based applications that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Social media have become increasingly popular (Duggan & Smith, 2013). Dutch adolescents, for example, spend on average 42 minutes per day on a social network site (SPOT, 2012). Of US adults who use the internet, 73% reported using at least one social network site (Duggan & Smith, 2013). Moreover, many social network site users visit the social network site at least once a day or even multiple times a day (Duggan & Smith, 2013). Online dating is also popular and is becoming an increasingly common way to meet a romantic partner among adults (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2011; Dutton, Helsper, Whitty, Buckwalter, & Lee, 2008). In the US, for example, 38% of US adults who were single and looking for a romantic partner reported having used an online dating site or app in 2013 (Smith & Duggan, 2013).
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The use of social media not only entails receiving and consuming information from others (as is the case with traditional mass media), but also encompasses creating and distributing content to others (Lenhart, Horrigan, & Fallows, 2004). This proliferation of self-generated media content poses an important new challenge to media effects research. As several scholars have emphasized (e.g., Pingree, 2007; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013a), it has become paramount that media effects research no longer exclusively considers the effects of media content on its receivers, but also focuses on the impact of media content on its creators and distributors.

In this context, it is crucial to consider that much of the media content that is created and distributed on popular social media is self-presentational in nature (boyd & Ellison, 2008; Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006). On many social media platforms, such as social network sites (e.g., Facebook) and dating sites, users share content through a personal online profile (boyd & Ellison, 2008; Ellison et al., 2006). All materials shared through such profiles represent the profile owner explicitly, through self-descriptions and self-depictions or, more implicitly, through shared movie and music preferences, articles and images (Krämer & Haferkamp, 2011; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Given the public or semi-public nature of online profiles, viewers of the profile are likely to form impressions of an individual based on the content on the individual’s online profile (Ellison et al., 2006). As individuals may be motivated to control the impression their profiles make on this audience (Krämer & Haferkamp, 2011), they engage in impression management, or self-presentation (these two terms are used interchangeably; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). As a result, popular social media, such as social network sites and dating sites, are potent platforms for online self-presentation, that is, all decisions made and behaviors aimed at making certain impressions on other people through social media (Ellison et al., 2006; Krämer & Haferkamp, 2011; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009).

An important motivation to engage in self-presentation is not only to influence how others see the self but also to shape one’s own view of the self (Baumeister, 1982). Scholars of self-presentation in its offline, face-to-face form have accordingly posited that presenting the self to others influences how one sees the self (Baumeister, 1982; Leary & Kowalski, 1990), which has been supported by empirical research (e.g., Schlenker; Dlugolecki, & Doherty, 1994; Tice, 1992). The notion that self-presentation can impact self-views seems particularly relevant for self-presentation on social media. On social media, people usually
have time to craft a self-presentation. Moreover, they can easily choose how and with which cues they present themselves (Walther, 2007). The controllability of self-presentation in social media gives people flexibility to adjust and change self-presentation, which, as related research suggests (Yee & Bailenson, 2007), impacts how people see themselves.

The centrality of online self-presentation on social media, the evidence that self-presentation in its face-to-face form can influence self-views, and the particularities of online self-presentation together thus point to the possibility that social media use may affect self-views. Research has initially shown that certain forms of social media use, notably on social network sites, indeed are associated with self-views, such as focus on one’s own physical appearance (Vandenbosch, & Eggermont, 2012), body satisfaction (Tiggeman & Miller, 2010; Tiggeman & Slater, 2013), and self-esteem (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011; Kim & Lee, 2011; Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006). Overall, however, research in this area is still relatively scarce, which is surprising given the massive use of social media (Duggan & Smith, 2013; SPOT, 2012), and the importance of self-views for well-being (Cattarin & Thompson, 1994; Impett et al., 2011; Valkenburg et al., 2006). Specifically, there are at least three important knowledge gaps, which this dissertation tries to fill.

First, media effects scholars have repeatedly emphasized that to comprehend the effects of media better, we need to understand how and why these effects may come about (Holbert & Stephenson, 2003; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013a). Some studies have started to investigate the processes underlying some effects of different social media platforms on certain self-views (e.g., Tiggeman & Miller, 2010; Valkenburg et al., 2006; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012). However, our knowledge is still basic. Many relations between social media use and self-views remain not well-understood. The first aim of this dissertation is therefore to identify underlying processes that can explain effects of social media use on self-views.

A second gap in the literature about the effects of social media use on self-views is that we do not know for which groups and in which situations these effects hold. This gap is important because there has been growing attention to the possibility that media effects are conditional rather than universal (e.g., Holbert & Stephenson, 2003; Kingston, Malamuth, Fedoroff, & Marshall, 2009; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013a). Media often have different effects depending on individuals’ characteristics and the situations in which individuals use media (e.g., Henderson-King & Henderson-King, 1997; Stice, Spangler, & Agras, 2001; Valkenburg & Peter,
However, in the research on the effects of social media on self-views, individual difference characteristics and situational factors have rarely been taken into account. For example, there is some evidence that the use of social network sites is positively correlated with self-esteem (e.g., Gonzales & Hancock, 2011; Valkenburg et al., 2006). However, based on more advanced theorizing about media effects (e.g., Valkenburg & Peter, 2013b) it seems unlikely that these effects are uniform and apply to all users of social network sites equally. Research is thus needed to identify which situational and individual difference factors determine the direction and strength of social media effects on self-views. Therefore, the second aim of this dissertation is to examine how social media use impacts self-views of different individuals in diverse situations.

A third shortcoming in the literature refers to the internal validity of the findings. Although some studies have shown that the use of social media is associated with self-views, most of this evidence, in particular regarding body-related self-views, is correlational (e.g., Tiggeman & Slater, 2013; Valkenburg et al., 2006; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2013). These studies suggest that people who see themselves in a certain way are concurrently more frequent social media users. However, these correlational studies cannot tell us unequivocally whether the use of this self-presentational medium predicts changes in self-views. The third aim of this dissertation is therefore to test, with more internally valid designs, if social media use can cause changes in self-views. The causality issue is addressed with a multi-methodological approach that combines experiments and longitudinal (panel) surveys. The combination of experiments and longitudinal (panel) surveys ensures an optimal balance between internal validity (high in experiments, lower in longitudinal surveys) and external validity (high in longitudinal surveys, low in experiments).

In sum, this dissertation aims to investigate whether and through which processes social media use impacts self-views and for whom and under which circumstances these effects hold in particular. The knowledge about the effects of social media use on self-views that this dissertation will provide is needed to predict how negative effects of social media use on self-views can be discouraged, while positive effects can be encouraged. This knowledge seems particularly relevant given the strong relation of self-views to mental health and well-being (Cattarin & Thompson, 1994; Impett et al., 2011; Valkenburg et al., 2006).
Self-Views and Social Media

Self-views constitute all thoughts and feelings about the self and is thus an umbrella for concepts such as self-esteem, self-concept, and self-efficacy (Swann et al., 2007). Although more general self-views can be identified (e.g., general self-esteem), specific self-views are often more informative when looking at the relationship between self-views and other variables (Swann et al., 2007). For example, it seems more useful to study the effects of reading a fashion magazine on self-views related to physical attractiveness than on general self-esteem.

The use of different social media may impact different self-views. This dissertation therefore looks at specific examples of common, popular forms of social media and their influence on specific relevant self-views. In particular, this dissertation deals with social network sites and dating sites. These platforms were selected based on their popularity (Duggan & Smith, 2013; Smith & Duggan, 2013; SPOT, 2012), and more importantly, for the centrality of self-presentation on these sites (Ellison et al., 2006; Krämer & Haferkamp, 2011). On social network sites, adolescents and adults present themselves to friends, relatives, acquaintances and sometimes strangers in order to keep or get in touch with them (Pempek et al., 2009). Dating sites, on the other hand, allow (single) adults to present themselves to potential romantic partners online (Ellison et al., 2006). The self-presentation motives and audience characteristics thus differ between these platforms. Consequently, the use of these different platforms may impact different types of self-views.

On social network sites, an important characteristic on which users evaluate each other is physical attractiveness (Ringrose, 2011; Siibak, 2009). This central focus on physical attractiveness raises questions regarding how such platforms affect the degree to which users focus on their own physical appearance, that is, their level of self-objectification. In addition, being evaluated based on physical attractiveness, as well as seeing others being evaluated in this way, may impact the degree to which individuals want to improve their own physical appearance, possibly with cosmetic surgery (Calogero, Pina, Park, & Rahemtulla, 2010). Furthermore, the strong focus on physical appearance and the comments and feedback received about appearance on social network sites may pressure users to conform to sociocultural body ideals. As the vast majority of individuals do generally not meet these ideals, body dissatisfaction may result (Thompson, Heinberg, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). In the context of social network sites, this dissertation therefore studies three self-views: self-objectification (Chapter 2),
desire to change the physical appearance through cosmetic surgery (Chapter 3), and body dissatisfaction (Chapter 4).

Dating sites may impact different self-views than social network sites because people usually visit dating sites for different reasons and encounter different audiences than on social network sites. When online, daters look at each other’s profiles and likely evaluate whether they would like to date each other. As a result, when constructing a profile on a dating site, people will probably try to present the self first and foremost as an attractive potential romantic partner and consider whether they will be seen as an attractive romantic partner by potential dates. This type of self-presentation and the (imagined) responses to this self-presentation in which romantic attractiveness or “dateability” plays a central role may particularly impact the degree to which one sees the self as an attractive potential romantic date or partner, that is, people’s romantic self-esteem. In the context of dating sites, this dissertation thus focuses on people’s romantic self-esteem (Chapter 5).

Underlying Processes

Given the novelty of social media, it is not surprising that we know little about the processes that may underlie effects of social media on self-views. However, existing theories on body-related self-views, such as objectification theory (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997) and the tripartite model of influence on body image (Thompson et al., 1999), as well as theories of impression management, such as the two-component model of impression management (Leary & Kowalski, 1990), have suggested several mechanisms that may explain such effects. Broadly speaking, these mechanisms fall in two groups of variables. The first group encompasses self-related variables, such as individuals’ feelings, cognitions, and behaviors. The second group encompasses other-related variables, such as the reactions from others that individuals receive. This dissertation investigates whether both self- and other-related variables can explain the effects of social media use on self-views.

In terms of self-related variables, the dissertation focuses on individuals’ appearance investment as well as their self-presentational efficacy along with idealized self-presentation as mechanisms that may underlie the effects of social media use on self-views. Several scholars have emphasized that, due to the centrality of appearance, social network sites are likely to impact the appearance-related cognitions and behaviors of those who present themselves on social network sites (Tiggeman & Miller, 2010; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012). One concept that
encompasses such appearance-related cognitions and behaviors is appearance investment. Appearance investment refers to the extent to which individuals’ behavior and thoughts revolve around physical appearance (Thompson, 2004). Importantly, appearance investment has been shown to be associated with desire for cosmetic surgery (Frederick, Lever, & Peplau, 2007; Sarwer et al., 2005; von Soest, Kvalem, Skolleborg, & Roald, 2006). If appearance investment is related to both the use of social network sites and the desire for cosmetic surgery, then social network site use may lead to desire for cosmetic surgery indirectly through appearance investment. Chapter 3 brings these ideas together by investigating whether appearance investment mediates a potential influence of social network site use on desire for cosmetic surgery.

With respect to online dating sites, various scholars have outlined that, compared to offline dating, such platforms facilitate the ways in which users can present themselves to prospective dates (for a review see Toma & Hancock, 2011). This enhanced possibility to present themselves may tempt users of online dating sites to engage in forms of self-presentation in which they strongly idealize themselves (Toma & Hancock, 2011). Given initial evidence that how individuals present themselves online may impact their self-views (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008; Walther et al., 2011), idealized self-presentation may be expected to affect self-views. At the same time, it has been well-documented, that one of the strongest predictors of whether people engage in a particular behavior is their perceived self-efficacy, that is, people’s sense of whether they can execute the given behavior successfully (Bandura, 1977). More specifically, research has shown that people’s sense of whether they are able to make desired impressions on others – self-presentational efficacy, that is – predicts online self-presentational behavior (Krämer & Winter, 2008), which may include idealized self-presentation. Self-efficacy may fluctuate (Bandura, 1977) and, due to the relative controllability of online self-presentation (Walther, 1996; Walther, 2007), may also be impacted by social media use. Self-presentational efficacy may thus explain why online dating sites tempt daters to engage in idealized self-presentation, which in turn may affect self-views. Chapter 5 will deal with this possibility.

In terms of other-related variables that may explain the effect of social media on self-views, the dissertation focuses on appearance training. Given the interactive nature of social media, their use may also impact individuals’ self-views through the reactions of others to the presenters’ online self-presentations. The audience of self-presentations in social media may comment on these self-
presentations directly on the platform (e.g., friends’ comments or likes under a photograph on Facebook) or indirectly in other internet applications (i.e., e-mail, chat) or face-to-face. The nature and frequency of these reactions may determine the presenter’s self-views to some extent.

The type of reactions that self-presenters receive likely depends on the social medium in which the self-presentation occurs. On social network sites, physical attractiveness plays a central role and users typically try to present themselves favorably in terms of their physical appearance (Ringrose, 2011; Siibak, 2009). As a result, the use of social network sites may stimulate comments and feedback on a presenter’s physical appearance. Specifically, presenters may receive feedback from others on the extent to which they match appearance ideals and how they could improve their appearance (Ringrose, 2011), that is, they receive appearance training (Jones, 2004). Appearance training, in turn, is associated with body dissatisfaction (Jones, 2004). Given that the use of social network sites is related to greater body dissatisfaction (Tiggeman & Miller, 2010; Tiggeman & Slater, 2013), it is investigated in Chapter 4 whether appearance training mediates the impact of social network site use on body dissatisfaction.

Individual and Situational Differences

To date, we know little about whether individual and situational differences impact the effects of social media use on self-views. Although this gap in the literature is understandable in a new research field, it is at odds with scholars’ recent emphasis on the importance of individual and situational differences in media effects (Holbert & Stephenson, 2003; Kingston et al., 2009; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013a). The current dissertation therefore takes a number of individual and situational factors into account which may moderate the effect of social media use on self-views, namely gender, exposure to mass media content and the anticipated mode of future interaction.

In terms of individual differences in the effects of social media use, this dissertation deals with gender, a variable that is crucial in research on self-views (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Cross & Madson, 1997; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Gender differences have been documented for various self-views, ranging from focus on and evaluation of the body to general self-esteem (e.g., Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Buswell, 1999; Muth & Cash, 1997). Furthermore, the effect of mass media on body-related self-views has been shown to differ between males and females (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2004). Consequently, scholars have argued
that the impact of social network site use on one’s views of the own body may also depend on gender (Tiggeman & Miller, 2010).

Compared to males, females are generally evaluated more strongly based on their physical attractiveness and, as a result, are socialized to focus more on being physically attractive (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). These gender differences also manifest themselves online (Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008; Siibak, 2009). For example, adolescents have reported that for girls it is the norm to promote their physical attractiveness in their profile on a social network site, whereas boys should not be overly concerned with their physique (Manago et al., 2008). Furthermore, girls are more inclined to try to display themselves as physically attractive on their social network site profiles than boys (Siibak, 2009). If there are gender differences in self-presentation on social media and male’s self-presentations are evaluated in a different manner than female’s self-presentations, then it seems conceivable that there are also gender differences in the effects of social media use on self-views. Chapters 3 and 4 will test this assumption.

In terms of situational differences in the effects of social media on self-views, this dissertation deals with exposure to mass media content and the anticipated mode of future interaction. Media use today often means media multitasking, notably for young people (Moreno et al., 2012). When media-multitasking, people use at least two media simultaneously, for example a social medium, such as a social network site, and a traditional medium, such as television. In the context of this dissertation, this raises the general question whether the effects of social media use may be affected by exposure to content from another medium. Given the potential effect of social media on body-related self-views, the more specific question arises whether exposure to content that focuses on physical appearance may boost such an impact. This question will be studied in Chapter 2.

A second situational factor that may determine how self-views are impacted by social media use concerns anticipations about the mode of future interaction. Many computer-mediated interactions, such as those on social media, offer increased control over self-presentations relative to face-to-face communication. Even if only anticipated, these differences in controllability may impact the effects of social media on self-views. For instance, presenting the self on a dating profile may have differential effects on self-views depending on whether the presenter expects future interaction face-to-face or through computer-mediated text-based chat. Assuming that people aim at conveying an idealized impression on their dating site profiles (Toma & Hancock, 2011), anticipated future interaction in the form
Chapter 1

of computer-mediated communication offers several chances to maintain this idealized self-presentation, for instance through the careful selection of pictures and crafting of self-descriptions (Walther, 1996; Walther, 2007). By contrast, expecting to meet someone face-to-face has been shown to limit idealization in an online dating profile as this idealized self-presentation may be hard to maintain face-to-face (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006). Differences in the mode of anticipated future interaction may thus affect how online daters present themselves, which in turn may impact their self-views. This possibility is studied in Chapter 5.

Methodological Approach

In line with the dissertation’s multi-methodological approach, the data used in the four empirical studies come from two experiments (Chapters 2 and 5) and a two-wave panel survey (Chapters 3 and 4). The experiment in Chapter 2 was an online experiment among 221 women aged 18-25 conducted in the beginning of 2012. The second experiment (Chapter 5) was a lab-based experiment conducted in spring 2013. The sample consisted of 92 heterosexual, single women aged 18-41.

The survey data (Chapter 3 and 4) were collected by the Netherlands Youth Institute (Nederlands Jeugdinstituut) and Rutgers WPF (Dutch Expert Centre on Sexuality). The data used in these chapters were part of a larger data set, which included measures of adolescents’ (sexual) media use, sexual attitudes and behaviors, and body image. The sample consisted of 604 adolescents aged 11-18. Participants were recruited through their parents who were members of Intomart GfK, an online access panel that consists of 25,000 members across the Netherlands. In comparison with convenience samples, such recruitment across the Netherlands improves generalizability. The first wave took place in July through September 2008 and the second wave was completed in December 2009.

The empirical studies of this dissertation focus on adolescents, young adults and adults, depending on the social medium studied. In the Netherlands, the majority of adolescents and young adults use social network sites and these are two groups that are the most likely to use social network sites (Van den Bighelaar & Akkermans, 2013). Furthermore, 38% of single adults are on dating sites (Smith & Duggan, 2013). Accordingly, the studies on social network site use focused on adolescents (11-18) and young adults (18-25) and the study on dating sites centered on single adults. Adolescents and young adults were also chosen because the self-views studied are particularly salient and important in these groups (Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005). For example, the studies investigating influences on body-related self-views (Chapters 2 and 4) focused on these age groups.
3 and 4) were conducted among adolescents as their body image is developing and plays an important role for well-being (Cattarin & Thompson, 1994; Impett et al., 2011; Mond et al., 2011; Smolak, 2004). The two experiments included women because they are more likely to focus on their physical appearance (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Muth & Cash, 1997) and tend to have lower self-esteem (Kling et al., 1999) than men.

**Overview of the Chapters**

The aforementioned aims and questions of this dissertation are addressed in four chapters. An overview of the characteristics of each chapter is provided in Table 1.

*Chapter 2* tests whether public online self-portrayal as it happens on social network sites leads to self-objectification among women, compared to private self-portrayal. In addition, Chapter 2 explores whether a situational factor, namely being exposed to objectifying media content, impacts the effect of public self-presentation on self-objectification.

*Chapter 3* tests the degree to which adolescents’ frequency of social network site use predicts changes in desire for cosmetic surgery and whether this effect is mediated by appearance investment. Furthermore, Chapter 3 investigates whether this effect differs for boys and girls.

*Chapter 4* investigates whether adolescents’ frequency of social network site use leads to changes in body dissatisfaction and whether this effect is mediated by appearance training. Furthermore, Chapter 4 tests whether these effects depend on adolescents’ gender.

In *Chapter 5* heterosexual single adult women construct an online dating profile. It is explored whether the anticipated mode of future interaction (computer-mediated chat vs. face-to-face) affects romantic self-esteem indirectly through self-presentational efficacy and idealized self-presentation.

The implications of these chapters are discussed in *Chapter 6* where more general conclusions are drawn and new gaps in our knowledge are identified. Chapter 6 also offers some practical advice concerning the well-being of adolescents and adults as well as suggestions to guide future research about social media and effects on how we see ourselves and our bodies.
# Chapter 1

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Introduction

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Chapter I


Introduction


Chapter 1


