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

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Chapter 6

Summary and Main Conclusion
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This dissertation aimed to investigate, with a multi-methodological approach, whether the use of social media affects self-views; through which processes these effects are mediated; and among which individuals and in which situations they may hold. Chapters 2-5 addressed these aims by focusing on how the use of social networking sites and dating sites impact self-objectification, desire for cosmetic surgery, body dissatisfaction, and romantic self-esteem. The findings in these chapters have a number of theoretical implications and may guide further research into the effects of social media use on self-views from a self-presentational perspective. In addition, the results have a number of implications for the well-being of adolescents and adults.

Main Findings

The empirical chapters of this dissertation all support the notion that the use of social media can impact individuals' self-views. Chapters 2 through 4 show effects of social network site use on users' focus on, evaluation of, and desire to change their bodies. The experiment described in Chapter 2 has shown that online self-presentation, as it would occur on social network sites, increases self-objectification among women, that is, it elevates their focus on the own physical attractiveness in comparison to other aspects of the self. This effect only occurred among women who had viewed objectifying media content shortly before.

Chapter 3 has demonstrated that more frequent social network site use predicts increases in adolescents' desire to undergo cosmetic surgery. This effect was mediated by increased investment in appearance. As described in Chapter 4, social network site use also led to body dissatisfaction, both among adolescent boys and girls. We expected this effect to be mediated by appearance training, that is, the reinforcement and comments adolescents receive from friends regarding the achievement of sociocultural body ideals. Social network site use did predict appearance training. However, appearance training did not predict body dissatisfaction. Therefore, appearance training did not mediate the effect of social network site use on body dissatisfaction. In contrast to our expectations, the relations between social network site use and the body-related self-views investigated in Chapter 3 and 4 did not differ between boys and girls.

Chapter 5 suggests that activities on dating sites can also affect a particular form of self-view: romantic self-esteem. The study in this chapter showed that the extent to which online daters saw themselves as attractive romantic partners or dates was influenced by the extent to which they idealized the self as an attractive
romantic partner on their dating profile. Daters’ idealized self-presentation, in turn, was affected by their perceived self-presentational efficacy, that is, the degree to which they expected to make a positive impression on a potential date. Self-presentational efficacy, finally, depended on the mode of anticipated future interaction. When daters expected to interact with a potential date in a computer-mediated setting in the future, their self-presentational efficacy was higher than when they expected to interact with a potential date in a face-to-face setting. In this way, relative to anticipating face-to-face interaction, anticipating interaction in a computer-mediated setting increased dater’s romantic self-esteem by augmenting their self-presentational efficacy and, as a result, their idealized self-presentation.

Theoretical Implications, Limitations, and Suggestions for Further Research

As outlined in the introduction, this dissertation aimed to contribute to knowledge about social media effects on self-views. The findings inform theorizing about the effects that the use of social media may have on self-views and, at the same time, raise a number of new questions for further research. These theoretical implications and suggestions for further research will be outlined in the subsection Social Media and Self Views. In addition, the various findings provide a number of explanations of why such effects of social media use on self-views may come about and which mechanisms may underlie these effects. The subsection Underlying Processes explicates what these findings mean for our understanding of the effects of social media on self-views. Finally, while the results were inconclusive in identifying individual differences in the effects of social media on self-views, they do offer ideas about the situations in which the effects of social media use on self-views may be the strongest. In the subsection Individual and Situational Difference Factors, it will be described what the findings imply in terms of the boundary conditions of the effects of social media on self-views.

Social Media and Self-Views

Both the longitudinal survey studies and experiments in this dissertation have demonstrated that social media use can affect views of the self and the body. The dissertation thereby extends and advances existing research on social media effects on self-views which, particularly in the area of self-views related to physical appearance, consists mainly of correlational studies (e.g., Tiggemann & Miller, 2010; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012). The dissertation
extends this body of research because it points out numerous new, hitherto scarcely studied effects of social media use, notably on desire for cosmetic surgery (Chapter 3) and romantic self-esteem (Chapter 5). The dissertation advances the existing body of research because it demonstrates, through its multi-methodological approach, effects of social media use on self-views in a more internally valid way than it was done before. Overall, the dissertation thus makes the case that the effects of social media use cannot be understood fully without focusing on what this use does to the users’ self-views.

The focus on the effects of social media use on self-views that this dissertation has established is important for at least three reasons. First, much previous research on the effects of social media has dealt with the consequences of social media use on concepts related to sociality, for example user’s friendship formation, their closeness to friends, or their relationship quality (for reviews, see e.g., Peter & Valkenburg, 2013; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). This predominant perspective of previous research is plausible given the interpersonal character of social media. This dissertation, however, clearly suggests that the interpersonal character of social media is also crucial for effects on self-views. A stronger focus on these effects in future research is thus very much needed.

Second, the focus on the effects of social media on self-views links communication research with research on face-to-face self-presentation. This research has shown that face-to-face self-presentation affects self-views (e.g., Leary and Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker, Dlugolecki, & Doherty, 1994; Tice, 1992) and has helped specify some of the underlying processes investigated in the dissertation. At the same time, the dissertation, with its background in communication research, contributes to research on the effects of face-to-face self-presentation on self-views. More specifically, the dissertation demonstrates that effects of self-presentation on self-views also occur when people use social media. The effects of self-presentation on self-views can thus occur even when the presenter’s self-presentation and the audience’s reception of the self-presentation are separated in space and time.

This dissertation also suggests that the effects of online and face-to-face self-presentation on self-views may differ. In Chapter 5, when users of a dating site expected to continue their self-presentation in a computer-mediated setting, their self-views following online self-presentation differed from the self-views of those who expected to continue their self-presentation face-to-face. This effect was attributed to the affordances of social media for online self-presentation, which offer the presenter more control over the self-presentation (e.g., editability, asynchronicity,
fewer cues) (Walther, 1996; Walther, 2007). A systematic investigation of whether and which of these affordances indeed lead online self-presentation to yield different effects on self-views than face-to-face self-presentation seems highly timely. In this context, it may also be fruitful to consider whether the different affordances of different social media platforms (e.g., Vine videos vs. Twitter) may elicit different effects on self-views.

Third and finally, the focus on the effects of social media on self-views is important in that it responds to recent calls from media effects scholars for more attention to expression (Pingree, 2007) or self-generated media effects (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). The basic idea in these calls is that media effects may not be confined to the receiver of information that is created and transmitted by others (as assumed in most media effects theories and research). Media effects may also occur when people themselves create and send information, such as on social media, and when exactly these activities affect the creators and senders of this information. The findings of the experiments (Chapters 2 and 5) can be interpreted in terms of such expression or self-generated effects. In these experiments, participants constructed online profiles, which affected their self-views. No interaction with others took place in these experiments; it was just the creation of an online profile that already affected users’ self-views. Interestingly, in Chapter 2, the construction of a profile only influenced self-views of individuals who had just viewed objectifying content as it could be found in traditional media, but this traditional media content did not influence the outcome variable self-objectification directly. In line with a few studies that show that online self-presentation can affect identity-related self-views (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008; Walther et al, 2011), the findings in Chapters 2 and 5 suggest that a creation- or expression-oriented perspective may be promising for our understanding of what users’ activities on social media do with them.

Underlying Processes

The current dissertation has taken an indirect-effects approach to social media effects on self-views by investigating the mediating role of self-related variables (i.e., appearance investment, self-presentational efficacy and idealized self-presentation) and other-related variables (e.g., appearance training). In line with scholars who have argued that media effects are typically not direct but mediated (Holbert & Stephenson, 2003; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013), this dissertation also yields evidence for indirect effects of social media on self-views. The findings of this dissertation particularly provide evidence for the mediating role of self-related
variables (i.e., appearance investment, self-presentational efficacy and idealized self-presentation). By contrast, the other-related variable studied in this dissertation, appearance training, did not act as a mediator.

In terms of self-related variables, this dissertation suggests that self-presentation, notably in terms of physical appearance, deserves attention when we try to understand the effects of social media, in particular social network sites, on self-views. On social network sites, there is an emphasis on users’ physical attractiveness (Ringrose, 2011; Siibak, 2009). In line with what earlier correlational research has shown (Meier & Gray, 2013; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012), the effects of social network site use found in the dissertation suggest that users are aware of the importance of looking good on such sites. Specifically, as a result of social network site use, adolescents were more likely to invest in their appearance cognitively and behaviorally (Chapter 3) and received appearance training from others (Chapter 4). Moreover, Chapter 2 suggests that, under certain circumstances, just presenting the self on a public profile can trigger a focus on one’s own physical appearance.

Critics of social network sites have claimed that such sites stimulate an unhealthy obsession with the self, particularly with the body and appearance (Twenge, 2009). While the findings of this dissertation do not directly support such broad generalizations, they do point to the possibility that a focus on physical appearance with regard to self-presentation on these sites may be an important factor in explaining adverse effects of the use of social network sites. This topic clearly awaits more study in future research.

This dissertation’s findings about the processes that underlie the effects of social media use on self-views also suggest that it may be beneficial to refine our conceptualization of reactions of others. Previous research has looked at this concept typically in terms of reactions that people actually receive from others on their self-presentations (Valkenburg, Peter & Schouten, 2006; Walther et al., 2011). Valkenburg et al. (2006), for example, have found that feedback from others explained changes in social self-esteem as a result of social network site use. Similarly, an experimental study by Walther et al. (2011) has suggested that reactions from others on one’s online self-presentation may affect the extent to which people adjust their self-views to their self-presentation. This dissertation has built on this work, but it was unable to corroborate the role of reactions from others as an explanation of why the use of social media affects self-views (Chapter 4). This one non-finding does not discard that reactions from others that people actually receive are important in explaining why social media affect self-views.
However, the dissertation also suggests that it may be useful to more strongly consider the reactions that individuals expect to produce as explanations of why social media use affects self-views.

Chapter 5, for example, has demonstrated that the extent to which online daters expected that they would successfully produce a favorable impression among prospective dates could explain effects on daters’ self-views. The more online daters who presented the self on an online dating profile believed that they would make the impression that they were attractive romantic partners, the more they subsequently viewed themselves as attractive romantic partners. The actual reactions that daters may typically receive on a profile were thus absent in this experiment and yet daters’ self-views changed. This finding strongly points to the possibility that the effects of social media use on self-views may at least partly be due to users’ anticipation of the future reactions from others that their self-presentation may elicit.

The notion that our behavior is influenced by how we expect others to see us has been put forward in several influential theories, notably in symbolic interactionism (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934) and in theories of self-presentation (Baumeister, 1982; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). In this context, the findings concerning the role of users’ anticipation of others’ reactions is closely related to Cooley’s (1902) looking-glass self concept. According to Cooley (1902), a person imagines how s/he appears to another person and the reaction of this other person. These processes contribute to the development of his/her self.

When using social media, users likely imagine how they will appear to others, for example, when crafting or modifying their profiles on a social network or a dating site. Moreover, when using social media, users also seem to take into account the expected reactions of others, a notion suggested by Chapter 5. Finally, when using social media, people’s self views seem affected, as this dissertation has shown. Given these parallels and, more generally, the inherently interpersonal nature of social media, with their actual and imagined audiences, it seems theoretically promising to think of reactions of others more strongly along the lines of imagined reactions in addition to actual reactions and conceptualize processes underlying the effects of social media on self-views accordingly.

**Individual and Situational Difference Factors**

Recent theorizing and research on media effects has emphasized that media effects are not universal, but likely depend on individual and situational
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difference factors (e.g., Holbert & Stephenson, 2003; Kingston, Malamuth, Fedoroff, & Marshall, 2009; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Accordingly, this dissertation has investigated whether individual difference factors, such as gender, or situational variables, such as exposure to other media content, change the effects that the use of social media has on self-views. The results were mixed. While there was evidence for the influence of situational factors, the current dissertation did not identify any individual difference effects of social media use on self-views. However, the investigation of individual difference factors remained limited to gender in this dissertation.

There may be at least two reasons why we did not find the expected moderating effects of gender. First, the operationalization of gender was relatively crude. Essentially, gender was operationalized as a dichotomy between females and males, which was supposed to capture the culturally defined differences between femininity and masculinity. Future research should try to capture such differences by also allowing for within-gender differences. Recent research on the effects of sexual media content, for example, has shown that concepts such as hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity – the adherence to stereotypical role patterns, that is – may be powerful and relevant individual difference factors in media effects (e.g., van Oosten, Peter, & Boot, in press). A second explanation of the absence of gender effects has to do with the fact that gender effects were only studied among adolescents (see Chapters 3 and 4). Gender identity is still developing in adolescence, certainly among younger adolescents. Possibly, this unfinished process may have hampered the influence of gender as an individual difference factor.

Given the scarcity of research on the effects of social media on self-views and the dominant theoretical role of gender in theory (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Cross & Madson, 1997; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), gender seemed to be the individual difference factor of choice. However, it may be that other individual difference variables mentioned in theory, such as self-monitoring, self-consciousness, and internalization of sociocultural body ideals (Dittmar & Howard, 2004; Doherty & Schlenker, 1991; Henderson-King & Henderson-King, 1997), may be more promising choices in future research.

In contrast to individual difference factors, we did find situational difference factors impacting the effects of social media on self-views. Chapter 2 demonstrated that whether an activity as it may happen on a social network site affected women’s self-objectification depended on whether they had been exposed to objectifying media content. Chapter 5 showed that when online daters expected that they
would interact with a potential date through CMC, they reported higher romantic self-esteem than when they expected direct face-to-face interaction. Anticipated mode of future interaction was not technically modeled as a moderator in Chapter 5. Experimentally manipulating dating site use (yes/no or frequency) together with anticipated future interaction while keeping all other factors constant proved difficult and was likely to create external validity problems. After all, creating a profile while anticipating future interaction with a potential match when not engaging in online dating does not occur in real life. Despite this shortcoming, it still seems plausible to assume that the effects of dating site use on romantic self-esteem are shaped by whether daters anticipate to interact with a date in a face-to-face or in a computer-mediated text-based chat setting. Chapter 5 does show that when daters do use dating sites, the romantic self-esteem they report after portraying themselves on a dating profile depends on the anticipated mode of future interaction. Therefore, the results of Chapter 5 may be interpreted as evidence of the influence of a situational difference variable.

The main conclusion from the findings in Chapters 2 and 5 is that, when studying the effects of social media use on self-views, it is important to consider the immediate media and (anticipated) future communication environment of users. In terms of users’ immediate media environment, Chapter 2 has shown that an objectifying advertisement, as it could have appeared in a magazine, allowed for the occurrence of an effect of social network site use activity on self-objectification. Given the current prevalence of media multitasking as predominant form of media use among young people (e.g., Moreno et al., 2012), it stands to reason that the moderating effect of a situational difference factor as identified in Chapter 2 may be much more common than reflected in the literature. The specific workings of such moderating effects are currently poorly understood. In Chapter 2, the situational factor – exposure to objectifying media content – was applicable and relevant to self-presentation on social network sites, but it is likely that non-applicable, irrelevant content – an advertisement for gardening products, for example – would not have impacted the effect on self-views. In order to understand the moderating effects of people’s immediate media environment on the influence of social media on self-views better, such boundary conditions deserve more attention.

In terms of the anticipated future communication environment of the users of social media, Chapter 5 has shown that the expectation of computer-mediated future communication led to greater romantic self-esteem among online daters than the expectation of future communication in a face-to-face setting. Whether
communication through social media stays in a purely computer-mediated setting or whether it migrates to, or is supplemented by, a face-to-face setting may thus have crucial implications for the occurrence and strength of effects of social media use on self-views. In line with Walther’s (1996) hyperpersonal theory, it stands to reason that the effects of social media use on how one sees the self remain the strongest when users expect future communication to also take place in a computer-mediated setting. In such a setting, users have more liberty to create a self-presentation less conform the impression they expect to make on others in face-to-face situations. The nature of the self-presentation affects presenters’ self-views – as this dissertation has shown, and may especially affect their self-views if the self-presentation differs greatly from the way a person sees the self based on face-to-face interactions. By contrast, when users expect future communication to take place in a face-to-face setting, these effects of social media use on self-views should be less distinct. In such a setting, users are more restricted in their self-presentation, which reduces the chance of self-presentations little resembling the offline self, and, therefore, limits effects on how one sees the self. If these predictions are correct, we should find the strongest effects of social media use on self-views among those who expect that their future communication with their contacts from the social media will be computer-mediated. Conversely, the effects should be the weakest among users of social media who anticipate that their future communication with their contacts from the social media will predominantly be face-to-face.

The findings of the dissertation provide new insights into the role of situational difference factors in the effects of social media. However, it is important to note that there may be many other potentially influential situational difference factors that have not been studied. One crucial situational factor may be the characteristics of the audience. Above, it has been outlined how important reactions of the audience, both actual and expected, may be for explaining why effects of social media on self-views emerge. These audience reactions are mediators as they result from individuals’ use of, and self-presentation on, social media. Audience characteristics, in contrast, may explain under which conditions effects of social media on self-views emerge or are the strongest, and are thus moderators or, in the terminology of this dissertation, situational factors.

Audience characteristics, may include the size of audience, whether one knows the audience, how close one is to the audience (e.g., family, friends, colleagues, strangers), and how similar one feels to members of the audience. As
several social scientific theories have suggested (Baumeister & Hutton, 1987; Leary & Kowalski, 1990), the characteristics of the audience determine an individual’s self-presentation. For self-presentation on social media this means that, depending on the audience, users of social media may present themselves very differently, which, in turn may affect their self-views differently. For example, self-presentation to a larger group may elicit more public commitment (Schlenker & Leary, 1982) to the self-presentation and, as a result, stronger effects on self-views. Such issues present exciting and fruitful questions for future research that will advance our understanding of the situational boundaries of the effects of social media on self-views.

**Implications for Well-Being**

Next to important implications for our theoretical understanding of social media effects on self-views, the current dissertation offers a number of practical implications, notably regarding the effects of social media use on well-being. An important implication offered by the current dissertation is that social network site use may have unfavorable effects on adolescents’ views of their bodies. More specifically, social network site use increased appearance investment and body dissatisfaction among adolescent girls as well as boys. It is crucial to note that both body dissatisfaction and appearance investment have been identified as important risk factors for mental health problems, such as eating disorder symptoms and depression and are negatively related to well-being among adolescents (e.g., Cattarin & Thompson, 1994; Impett, Henson, Breines, Schooler, & Tolman, 2011; Mond, Van den Berg, Boutelle, Hannan, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2011). Furthermore, appearance investment goes hand in hand with activities that are sometimes costly in terms of time, energy, and money and may also go at the expense of academic achievement, relationships, and physical health (Lamarche & Gammage, 2012; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2003; White & Halliwell, 2010). As shown in Chapter 3, social network site use led to desire for cosmetic surgery through appearance investment.

Although the effects are relatively small and the exact processes and conditional factors are still unclear; this dissertation shows that the potential negative effects of social network site use on adolescents’ body-related self-views should not be neglected. This conclusion seems even more timely considering that the effects were found among adolescents. Body image is an important aspect of adolescent development (Markey, 2010) and it stands to reason that negative effects experienced in adolescence may solidify and translate into bigger problems in adulthood.
Although the negative effects of social network site use on adolescents’ body-related self-views are striking, it is important to emphasize that the dissertation also suggests potentials for positive effects of social media. As Chapter 5 has shown, a positive self-presentation increased people’s self-esteem. This finding is in line with other research on the positive effects of social media use on self-esteem (e.g., Gonzales & Hancock, 2008) and raises many interesting questions for future research. For example, does the positive effect of online presentation on self-esteem apply to everybody or is there a rich-get-richer phenomenon (Kraut et al., 2002) taking place? That is, do all individuals present themselves positively on social media or do especially those with a high self-esteem present the self more positively which further increases their self-esteem? To answer such questions is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but shows how relevant its findings may be for our understanding of what social media mean for people’s well-being.

Some 20 years ago, when individuals increasingly started to use the internet, only few people foresaw the far-reaching changes it would elicit in how we relate to each other. Some ten years ago, when people increasingly used the internet as a social medium, only few people foresaw the far-reaching changes it would elicit in how we see ourselves. Today, we start to understand that what we do on the internet, particularly on social media, has effects on our self-views. This dissertation has made an important step in showing some of these effects of social media on how we see ourselves and our bodies.
References


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