

Social media shots affect body image because we only show our best side

Many modern celebrities are known for being excessive sharers on social media. For instance, the Kardashians are notorious for posting daily glamorous and often lingerie clad images on Instagram that attract several million likes.

But it's not just images of attractive celebrities that flood social media. Friends, acquaintances and strangers post images of themselves too, often editing them to disguise face blemishes, make cheeks rosier or to make their nose look smaller.

When people look at these attractive images on social media, research shows they often compare their own appearance to those images and think they're less attractive than the images they see.

We know these comparisons can make women unhappy with their appearance and put them in a bad mood. Given body dissatisfaction is an important predictor for eating disorders, we need to know if some types of comparisons are worse for people's body image than others.

Most research on appearance comparisons has focused on people comparing their own bodies to models in magazines, on billboards or on television.

But our recent research found women rarely compare their appearance to others' in magazines or on billboards, and only sometimes compare their appearance to others' on TV. We found social media comparisons better reflect the types of comparisons young women make every day.

In our study, 150 female undergraduate students answered online surveys five times a day for five days. For each survey, they reported if they had compared their appearance with someone else's, and whether they made that comparison after looking at social media, traditional media or in person. They also reported whether they thought the person looked better, the same or worse than them. They then rated their body image, mood and thoughts of dieting and exercising.

Social media is the key

Women mostly thought others looked better than them on social media. This is likely due to women selectively posting the most attractive images of themselves on social media and enhancing those images to look like images in magazines, which are routinely edited.

Comparisons made between their own appearance and attractive others on social media were particularly harmful for women in our study.

Women reported being in the worst mood after social media comparisons relative to other comparisons. When women made social media comparisons, they also reported being unhappier with their appearance and more motivated to start unhealthy weight-loss activities, like going on a diet, than when they made comparisons in person.

These findings are consistent with other research linking social media appearance comparisons or envy with depression and body dissatisfaction. Our findings also add to research that suggests certain activities such as comparisons on social media may be harmful to women's body image and mood, rather than just overall use.