THE IMPACT OF BODY-POSITIVITY AND BODY-CHECKING TIKTOK VIDEOS

ON BODY IMAGE

by

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ABSTRACT

TikTok is an increasingly popular social media platform that allows users to share videos. Many of those videos are body-checking videos (showing especially fit women looking at their bodies at various angles) or body-positivity videos (showing predominantly overweight women and encouraging women to love and accept their bodies). The present study experimentally investigated the impact of such TikTok videos on young women's body dissatisfaction. Participants were 296 female undergraduate students who were randomly assigned to view either a set of body-checking TikTok videos, body-positivity TikTok videos, or control TikTok videos without people. Compared with exposure to both the body-positivity videos and controls videos, exposure to the body-checking videos caused greater body dissatisfaction as well as increased negative feelings in the participants. Social media effects were also perceived to be more negative after watching the body-checking videos, compared to the body-positivity videos and control videos. These findings suggest that body-checking TikTok videos can negatively impact body image and associated emotions, whereas body-positivity videos may improve body image and esteem.

I. INTRODUCTION

TikTok, released in 2017 before merging with the popular social media app Musical.ly, has become one of the largest social media platforms. It is a social media app specifically designed for video sharing, and specific to the current study, many of the videos focus on weight control and body image. In fact, recent studies show that TikTok's video-sharing algorithm can lead to viewers seeing tens of thousands of weight loss and body-checking videos over a span of a couple of weeks (Hobbs et al., 2021). While the impact of related content on Facebook and Instagram has been shown to be detrimental to the viewers' body image, as evident in the literature review below, the impact of these TikTok videos is relatively unknown. Thus, the aim of the current study is to investigate the impact of viewing these TikTok body-checking videos (showing especially fit women looking at their bodies at various angles) on the body image of college-aged women.

The negative impact of social media on body image has been demonstrated in a variety of different social media platforms even when passively browsing (Casale et al., 2019; Choukas-Bradley et al., 2019; Danthinne et al., 2021; Fardouly et al., 2015; Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2019; Slater et al., 2019; Stein et al., 2021; Strubel et al., 2018), especially in women who have high comparison tendencies (Fardouly et al., 2015). Compared to men, women tend to show a higher drive for thinness and have higher levels of influence by media (Fernandez & Pritchard, 2012). This effect tends to start in adolescence or earlier. For girls, social media has a direct effect on the internalization of the social media ideal as well as the muscular ideal (Rodgers et al., 2020). In a study done on 160 female first-year psychology students, it was found that participants were

significantly more likely to make appearance comparisons through social media than through any other form of media, and that these comparisons through social media were associated with lower appearance satisfaction and with more thoughts of dieting and exercising to lose weight (Fardouly et al., 2017).

There has been particular interest in how thinspiration influences women's moods as well as body satisfaction (Brown & Tiggemann, 2020; Couture Bue & Harrison, 2020; Munsch et al., 2021; Prichard et al., 2020; Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2019; Slater et al., 2019; Tiggemann & Velissaris, 2020). Thinspiration refers to social media content that shows women who are overly thin, who are predominantly White, and who wear sexualized clothes and pose in sexualized ways (Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015; Wick & Harriger, 2018). It has been demonstrated that after thin ideal exposure, body image dissatisfaction is increased as well as there being a slight increase in impulses to engage in disordered eating (Munsch et al., 2021). In contrast, other studies have found that exposure to average sized women may result in lower body dissatisfaction (Slater et al., 2019).

As thinspiration has been decreasing in popularity, fitspiration, or fitspo, has become more popular on apps such as Instagram and TikTok. Fitspiration refers to social media content that shows women who are fit and lean (with just a small degree of muscle definition), who are predominantly White, and who wear sexualized clothes posed in sexualized ways (Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2018; Hinz et al., 2021). Just as thinspiration did, fitspiration has been shown to have negative effects on women's self-esteem (Prichard et al., 2020; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). In a study done on 108 female undergraduate students, those who viewed fitspiration images had significantly greater negative mood and significantly greater body dissatisfaction than those who were

exposed to the control (Prichard et al., 2020). In addition, fitspiration imagery in this study did not produce a greater inclination to exercise, which is the supposed goal of fitspiration content.

In contrast, women's self-esteem and body satisfaction are improved upon viewing body-positivity social media content (Clayton et al., 2017; Couture Bue & Harrison, 2020; Danthinne et al., 2021; Slater et al., 2019; Tiggemann & Velissaris, 2020), which portrays predominantly overweight women and encourages women to love and accept their bodies (Cohen et al., 2019). Moreover, even if idealized images are presented, if they are accompanied by a reality-check comment or image, then women will have the same or lower post-test body-anxiety compared to their pre-test body-anxiety (Couture Bue & Harrison, 2020; Slater et al., 2019; Tiggemann & Velissaris, 2020).

In summary, research has shown that thinspiration and fitspiration social media negatively impact body image, whereas body-positivity social media improves body image. However, this research largely focused on Facebook and Instagram, as opposed to the increasingly popular TikTok app. In the current study, college-aged women were exposed to either fitspiration body-checking videos, body-positivity videos, or control videos without people. Based on the research with other forms of social media, it was hypothesized that body image (assessed with four different measures) would be lower after viewing the fitspiration body-checking TikTok videos, compared to the body-positivity and control TikTok videos.

II. METHOD

Participants

Participants were recruited from Introduction to Psychology courses through the use of Texas State University's SONA system. As compensation for their participation, they were given one credit to be applied toward their research experience requirement for the course.

Of the 300 undergraduate students who completed the study, only 296 were female and the remaining students' data were removed from the study. Of these 296 female students, 43.7% were White, 34.6% were Latinx or Hispanic, 15.9% were Black, 2.4% were Asian or Pacific Islander, 2.7% were biracial, and 0.7% labeled themselves as other. They were aged between 18 and 32 years, with a mean age of 18.52 ($SD = 1.22$).

Measures

A body dissatisfaction scale was developed to assess the participant's perception of how their own body looks. This scale included the following five statements: "I have a generally positive view of how I look," "I am happy with the way that my body looks," "I feel confident about my body," "I enjoy looking at myself," and "I believe that I am beautiful." Participants used a 5-point Likert scale to indicate their level of agreement with each statement, with the response options ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The response options were reverse-coded, such that higher scores represented greater body dissatisfaction. Because this body dissatisfaction scale has not been used in prior research, a factor analysis using maximum likelihood extraction and varimax rotation was performed using the data collected in the current study. Only one factor had an Eignevalue greater than 1 (3.59), explaining 71.71% of the variance among

the items, $\chi^2 = 38.58$, $p < .001$. Further, all five items loaded onto this factor with high factor loadings that ranged from .72 to .87. Cronbach's alpha for the 5-item body dissatisfaction scale was .90, suggesting strong internal reliability.

A negative social media effects scale was developed to assess the participant's perception of the negative effects of social media on how they perceive their own body. This scale included the following five statements: "Social media makes me unhappy with my body," "I compare myself to images and videos of women on social media," "I avoid posting my body on social media because I am insecure about it," "Social media makes me want to change the way I look," and "Social media has a negative impact on my view of my body." Participants used a 5-point Likert scale to indicate their level of agreement with each statement, with the response options ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Thus, higher scores represented greater negative impacts of social media. As with the body dissatisfaction scale, a factor analysis using maximum likelihood extraction and varimax rotation was performed using the data collected in the current study. Only one factor had an Eignevalue greater than 1 (2.72), explaining 54.32% of the variance among the items, $\chi^2 = 25.09$, $p < .001$. However, only three of the five items had factor loadings of at least .50 (.75 for "Social media makes me want to change the way I look," .81 for "I compare myself to images and videos of women on social media," and .82 for "Social media makes me unhappy with my body"). The remaining two items that had factor loadings below .50 were excluded from the scale. Cronbach's alpha for the 3-item negative social media effects scale was .83, suggesting good internal reliability.

A figure dissatisfaction scale (Mutale et al., 2016) was used to assess the

participant's perception of how their own body looks in comparison to other bodies. This scale included pictures of nine female body types ranging in size from very thin (1) to very obese (9). Participants were asked to select the figure that reflected their current body type and to then select the figure that reflected their ideal body type, with the discrepancy between these two serving as the measure of figure dissatisfaction.

A TikTok feeling scale was developed to assess the participant's perception of how the TikTok videos in the current study made them feel. This scale included two statements, for which participants used a 5-point Likert scale to indicate their level of agreement, with the response options ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The two statements were "I felt insecure when watching the TikTok videos" and "The TikTok videos made me feel good about myself," with the scores for the latter statement being reverse coded. Because the scores for these two items were significantly correlated in the current study ($r = .32$, $p < .001$), the two scores were summed for this scale, with higher values representing greater negative feelings as a result of watching the TikTok videos.

TikTok Videos

Three sets of stimuli were selected for the study. The body-checking section contained ten videos, totaling 126 seconds of content. The women in these videos were thin and fit, and appeared predominantly White (80%). The body-positivity section contained nine videos, totaling 125 seconds of content. The women in these videos were either average-sized or overweight, and represented a wide variety of races (56% appeared to be non-White). The different sizes included visibly muscular, overweight, skinny, and average-sized. The control section contained ten videos, totaling 121 seconds

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of content. The videos included a variety of subjects including animals, weather, and travel. All but one of the videos were without human figures. The one video with a human figure simply had a hand in it.

Procedure

Participants were recruited online and randomly assigned to one of the three experimental conditions (body-checking, body-positivity, or control), subject to equal Ns. First, the participants completed a pre-exposure survey with the demographic questionnaire, followed by the body dissatisfaction scale and the negative social media effects scale described previously. Next, participants viewed the TikTok videos that were in their experimental condition. After viewing each video, they indicated how much they enjoyed the video using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "dislike a great deal" to "like a great deal." Finally, participants completed a post-exposure survey with the body dissatisfaction scale, the negative social media effects scale, and the figure dissatisfaction scale described previously.

Statistical Analyses

The data were downloaded from Qualtrics and analyzed in SPSS, version 28. Four one-way ANOVAs were conducted to assess the impact of the TikTok videos on body image. For each ANOVA, the between-subjects variable was the TikTok video condition (body-checking, body-positivity, and control). The dependent variables for these four analyses were the four dependent variables: body dissatisfaction (i.e., the difference in scores for the body dissatisfaction scale completed before and after watching the videos, with positive scores representing an increase in body dissatisfaction as a result of watching the videos), negative social media effects (i.e., the difference in scores for the

negative social media effects scale completed before and after watching the videos, with positive scores representing an increase in the perceived negative effects of social media as a result of watching the videos), negative feelings after TikTok videos (i.e., the score on the TikTok feeling scale completed after watching the videos), and figure dissatisfaction (i.e., the score on the figure dissatisfaction scale completed after watching the videos). For each ANOVA, a standard alpha criterion of .05 was used to determine statistical significance, and Tukey HSD post hoc tests were conducted to determine the specific group differences in cases of statistical significance.

III. RESULTS

The first ANOVA revealed a significant effect of the TikTok video condition on body dissatisfaction, $F(2, 286) = 7.86$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$. The Tukey HSD post hoc tests revealed that body dissatisfaction as a result of watching the TikTok videos was significantly greater for those in the body-checking condition compared to those in both the control condition ($\Delta M = 0.89$, $SE = 0.28$, $p = .005$, 95% CI [0.22, 1.55]) and the body-positivity condition ($\Delta M = 1.03$, $SE = 0.28$, $p = .001$, 95% CI [0.37, 1.69]; see Table 1). Body dissatisfaction as a result of watching the TikTok videos did not significantly differ between those in the body-positivity condition and those in the control condition ($\Delta M = 0.15$, $SE = 0.28$, $p = .86$, 95% CI [-0.81, 0.52]).

Table 1

M (SD) for the Body Image Dependent Variables for Each TikTok Video Condition

	Body-checking	Body-positivity	Control
Body dissatisfaction (difference score)	0.03 (1.87)	-1.00 (2.43)	-0.85 (1.45)
Social media effects (difference score)	0.46 (1.94)	-0.65 (1.72)	-0.33 (1.53)
Negative feelings after TikTok videos	7.25 (1.77)	5.14 (1.60)	4.82 (1.33)
Figure dissatisfaction after videos	1.19 (1.99)	1.46 (1.74)	1.37 (1.91)

The second ANOVA revealed a significant effect of the TikTok video condition on negative social media effects, $F(2, 289) = 10.54$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$. The Tukey HSD post hoc tests revealed that negative social media effects as a result of watching the TikTok videos was significantly greater for those in the body-checking condition

compared to those in both the control condition ($\Delta M = 0.79$, $SE = 0.25$, $p = .004$, 95% CI [0.21, 1.38]) and the body-positivity condition ($\Delta M = 1.11$, $SE = 0.25$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.52, 1.70]; see Table 1). Negative social media effects as a result of watching the TikTok videos did not significantly differ between those in the body-positivity condition and those in the control condition ($\Delta M = 0.32$, $SE = 0.25$, $p = .41$, 95% CI [-0.91, 0.27]).

The third ANOVA revealed a significant effect of the TikTok video condition on negative feelings, $F(2, 289) = 68.92$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .32$. The Tukey HSD post hoc tests revealed that negative feelings as a result of watching the TikTok videos were significantly greater for those in the body-checking condition compared to those in both the control condition ($\Delta M = 2.44$, $SE = 0.23$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.91, 2.97]) and the body-positivity condition ($\Delta M = 2.12$, $SE = 0.23$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.59, 2.65]; see Table 1). Negative feelings as a result of watching the TikTok videos did not significantly differ between those in the body-positivity condition and those in the control condition ($\Delta M = 0.32$, $SE = 0.23$, $p = .34$, 95% CI [-0.85, 0.22]).

The last ANOVA revealed an insignificant effect of the TikTok video condition on figure dissatisfaction, $F(2, 288) = 0.55$, $p = .58$, $\eta_p^2 = .004$.

IV. DISCUSSION

The major aim of this study was to investigate the effects that body-positivity and fitspiration body-checking TikTok's have on women's body dissatisfaction. Based on the research with other forms of social media, it was hypothesized that body image (assessed with four different measures) would be lower after viewing the fitspiration body-checking TikTok videos, compared to the body-positivity and control TikTok videos. The study conducted effectively supported our hypothesis. The research findings were consistent with previous research showing that fitspiration body-checking imagery in other social media platforms leads to increased body dissatisfaction (Prichard et al., 2020; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015) while those exposed to body-positive imagery had improved body satisfaction and self-esteem (Clayton et al., 2017; Couture Bue & Harrison, 2020; Danthinne et al., 2021; Slater et al., 2019; Tiggemann & Velissaris, 2020). Despite what may seem like motivation to be healthier, social media with fitspiration body-checking serves as a tool to make women feel worse about themselves. This contrasts with body-positivity social media which seems to make women feel better about themselves and their bodies, at least in comparison to the fitspiration body-checking social media.

Interestingly, the current study found no significant differences in body dissatisfaction between women in the body-positivity and control TikTok video conditions. It may be possible that the videos in the control condition enhanced the participants' mood, which may have then impacted their body image perceptions. Supporting this possibility is past research revealing that a positive mood induction improves body satisfaction (Svaldi et al., 2016; Veale et al., 2016). In the current study,

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of the 10 TikTok videos in the control condition, four were cute animal videos and another four videos included humor. In fact, compared to participants in the body-checking condition, participants in the control condition gave significantly higher ratings to indicate how much they liked the videos.

Limitations in the current study should be acknowledged. First, the sample included only undergraduate college students with a mean age of 19 years, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research should investigate the impact of TikTok videos on younger and older women, as well as men. Second, with the study being conducted online, there was not a means of verifying the amount of attention to the videos. With the Qualtrics survey software, we were able to ensure that participants could not advance to the next question before the duration of the video had elapsed. However, we were unable to verify that participants were not distracted during those durations with other things outside of the study. Future research should attempt to replicate the current findings in the lab with the researcher present. Third, the current study did not account for the possible change in mood that may result from viewing the control videos. Future research could assess the impact of positive, negative, and neutral mood-inducing TikTok videos on body satisfaction.

While there has been a multitude of studies done on how other social media apps influence body satisfaction in women (e.g., Casale et al., 2019; Choukas-Bradley et al., 2019; Danthinne et al., 2021; Fardouly et al., 2015; Munsch et al., 2021; Prichard et al., 2020; Rodgers et al., 2020; Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2019; Slater et al., 2019; Stein et al., 2021; Strubel et al., 2018; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015), there has been very little research on how TikTok video imagery impacts women. The findings of the current study

suggest that there may be a positive application of TikTok videos (with either body-positivity imagery or control content that improves mood) on women's self-esteem, but they also suggest that there are negative applications as well when the videos include fitspiration body-checking content. Through researching these topics further, it may become possible to fully understand the way that TikTok can be used to effect women.

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