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Addressing Body Image Issues on Instagram: An Intervention-Based Approach

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ABSTRACT: The negative consequences of Instagram on young adults—in particular, its impact on body image—have become increasingly apparent and difficult to address. This research tested the efficacy of three nudge-style interventions (two moral) designed to ameliorate this issue compared to a non-nudge control. Using a sample of real Instagram posts made by same-gender influencers (*N*= 10, gender-matched), it was tested whether reading subtle nudges prior to scrolling the posts would lead to higher body acceptance, self-esteem, and/or self-compassion among a sample of mainly young adult (age range = 18-62, *M*= 18.69, SD = 3.77) social media users (*N*= 320). A two-way ANOVA revealed that across male-identifying (*N*= 160) and female-identifying (*N*= 160) participants, the interventions were associated with greater body acceptance in participants. The most successful intervention in the study included deontological language, indicating that a moral nudge could be an effective option to address body image issues caused by Instagram at their source.

KEYWORDS: Behavioral and Social Sciences; Sociology and Social Psychology; Social Networking Sites (SNS); Instagram; Body Image.

■ Introduction

Social media has become a critical contributor to mental health issues in young adults.[1-3] One of the primary areas of concern is its impact on body image; the use of social networking sites (SNS) has been linked with body dissatisfaction,[4] eating concerns,[5] and a higher drive for thinness.[6] Controversy is growing about the negative impact of Instagram, in particular, on adolescent body image. An image-based application, Instagram promotes ideals of thinness and unrealistic beauty standards, which in turn raise body image concerns.[7] Researchers have documented the relationship between Instagram use and decreased body image,[8-10] and a recent study reports that 32% of adolescent girls said that when they felt bad about their bodies, Instagram made these feelings worse.[11] This negative body image has been linked with self-esteem and social comparison, factors that contribute greatly to overall emotional well-being.[12,13]

Instagram influencers—people who develop a large following and promote a certain lifestyle, product, or service to their fans—have emerged. Currently, over 500,000 active influencers operate on Instagram.[14] Surpassing traditional aesthetic celebrities (e.g., fashion models) in popularity, Instagram influencers exhibit seeming perfection in their lives and attract a large base of users who wish to imitate their life, inspiring users to follow their endorsements.[15] This new category of celebrities contributes to body concerns through promoting an idealized beauty standard,[16] and scrolling through images of influencers can elicit unhealthy self-comparison and body dissatisfaction.[17] The rampant editing of images posted on Instagram only exacerbates self-comparison and negative body image.[4]

Research on the topic of SNS and body image is extensive, primarily centering on the link between time spent on SNS and decreased body image[6,18] and increased self-comparison.[17,19] However, studies have yet to identify a viable solution to address the issues. One strategy that appears promising is for users to view interventions before they scroll; recent research suggests that interventions can be effective at promoting higher body appreciation, acceptance, and esteem.[20] Further, text-based nudges are tractable, and social media platforms are already implementing them in a variety of arenas, from misinformation to hate speech. Pinterest, a leading social media site, has even blocked content for certain body image related trigger words, and instead links to disordered eating help and resources.[21] Recently, interventions based specifically on moral frameworks have proven effective at influencing users in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.[22] Ethical frameworks being used in public health is not a new idea—moral language has been implemented across many domains.[23,24] However, research is lacking on whether moral frameworks can be used as a tool for behavioral change in the context of body image concerns online. It is also evident that moral and emotional messages are more likely to spread around social media, suggesting that this morality could be harnessed by the network themselves to support body positivity.[25] Overall, moral messaging has been shown to be more persuasive than nonmoral appeals, leading to the inclusion of moral frameworks in this study.[26]

This study tests whether three different interventions positively impact Instagram users' body image, self-esteem, and self-comparison. Each of these factors have been shown to relate to one another.[12,13] Each one measures a different but related aspect of body image concerns connected to social media use.[27-29] Therefore, it is important to measure each of these factors when exploring how body-image can be intervened upon online. The interventions were given to a group of men (N=160) and women (N=160). Previous work suggests that there are differences in body acceptance, social compar

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ison and self-esteem across genders, with women generally reporting lower body satisfaction.[30,31] For this reason, participants were shown posts made by same-gender influencers. This enabled testing whether there were differences between men and women in terms of the impact of moral messages on body image. Two of the interventions (deontological and consequentialist) are based on established moral frameworks. Deontology centers on duty and rule-based ideology, defining morality in terms of absolute right and wrong.[32,33] A deontological intervention, therefore, would include a defining statement of duty or obligation in relation to body image. On the other hand, consequentialism asserts that the consequences of an action are the main determinants of its moral worth. Utilitarianism, the most well-known branch of consequentialism,[34] stresses the happiness of the majority as the goal consequence of any action.[35,36] A utilitarian intervention, therefore, might emphasize the widespread beneficial consequences of body positivity.[37] There was also a control intervention and a no-intervention control.

The first hypothesis was that all three interventions will have a positive impact on body acceptance in both men and women. As an additional, exploratory analysis, it was tested whether there were gender differences in the impact of the intervention conditions across the three scales. The next hypothesis was that the interventions based on moral frameworks would be more effective than the control intervention. The hope in exploring these hypotheses was to identify an effective approach to mitigating negative body image effects of Instagram use, thereby contributing to a healthier social media environment for users.

Methods

To test whether body appreciation is positively impacted by moral interventions, a 2x4 experimental design was conducted. A non-random sample of predominantly young adult participants (age range= 18-62, *M*= 18.69, *SD*= 3.77) were provided with a link to the survey (*N*= 320). Approximately half of participants identified as male ("men") and half as female ("women"). All participants were randomly assigned to view a moral or control intervention or to view no intervention at all. Two of the interventions were based on different moral frameworks: one was rooted in deontology, and one in consequentialism (as illustrated in Table 1).

Procedure:

The study was conducted using the Qualtrics (Qualtrics, Provo, UT) platform and distributed through online platforms. Participants were informed that the study was designed to investigate issues around body image on Instagram. The survey began by showing participants one of three interventions (deontological, consequentialist, control) or no intervention. This condition was randomly assigned using Qualtrics. The interventions were displayed to participants as black text on a white background, using the standard Qualtrics text block style. After viewing these interventions, the participants were shown a series of real posts made to Instagram by influencers.[38] Immediately prior to viewing the posts, participants were told that the posts were genuine (i.e., posted to Instagram by platform users). Then participants were asked to complete three scales after viewing the posts. The first scale, the Body Acceptance Scale-2 (BAS-2), measures body acceptance, respect toward their body, and overall favorable opinions of their bodies.[39] The second scale, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), assesses general self-esteem.[40] The final scale, the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM), measures the social comparison of participants.[41] Then, demographic data about the participants' basic information and social media habits were recorded, including questions such as "How often do you use Instagram?" and "How many accounts do you follow on Instagram?"

Materials

Table 1: The table outlines the three frameworks used as intervention options as well as the text that was displayed to participants.

Framework	Message
Deontology (moral)	Body positivity promotes an inclusive and ethical online environment. Embrace it as you scroll.
Consequentialism (moral)	Body positivity helps make the world a happier, healthier place for everyone. Embrace it as you scroll.
Control	Comparison is the thief of joy. Enjoy your Instagram experience and focus on uplifting yourself.

Instagram Posts:

Participants scrolled through a series of 10 real posts made to Instagram by influencers. Female participants saw posts made by female influencers and male participants saw male influencers. The posts were adapted from an existing study that identified content published to Instagram by 784 health and wellness influencers in 2020.[38] The 20 most popular posts were sampled, 10 females and 10 males, to present to participants. Following the data-sharing terms of service of Instagram,[42] examples of the posts used cannot be provided here.

Body Acceptance Scale-2:

The BAS-2 consists of 10 items and uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). Higher scores indicate a higher body acceptance, and to calculate this score item responses are averaged. Items include "I respect my body" and "I am comfortable in my body." Previous research shows strong internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.97$) and test-retest reliability (r= 0.77) in community and college samples of men and women.[39]

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale:

The RSES consists of 10 items and uses a 4-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. For items 1, 2, 4, 6, 7: Strongly Agree=3, Agree=2, Disagree=1, and Strongly Disagree=0. For items 3, 5, 8, 9, 10: Strongly Agree=0, Agree=1, Disagree=2, and Strongly Disagree=3. Higher scores indicate higher self-esteem, ranging from 0-30. Items include "I feel that I have a number of good qualities" and "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself." Based on past studies, the scale has adequate internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.77$ to 0.88) and test-retest reliability (r = 0.82 to 0.88).[43]

INCOM Social Comparison Scale:

The INCOM Social Comparison Scale consists of 11 items and uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "I disagree strongly" to "I agree strongly." Items 5 and 11 are reverse coded. Items include "I often compare how I am doing socially (e.g., social skills, popularity) with other people" and "I always like to know what others in a similar situation would do." Past research demonstrates consistent Cronbach's alphas ranging from .78 to .85 in 10 American samples.[41]

Results and Discussion

Results:

To test whether reading an intervention before viewing influencer content resulted in improved body image, a one-way ANOVA was conducted. The results suggested that all three of the nudges were associated with higher scores on the BAS-2; consequentialist (M= 19.15), deontological (M= 23.01), and control (M= 18.77) nudges were all associated with average scores that were significantly higher than those recorded by participants in the no-nudge control condition (M= 18.16), $F(3, 316)$= 222.11, p< .001. Post-hoc comparisons of the groups conducted using Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference tests revealed that each condition was significantly different from the others, all ps< .01. This suggests that deontological nudges were associated with the highest body image after exposure to influencer content, followed by consequentialist and then the control nudges (see Figure 1). Again, these results replicated for the two other scales measured (RSES and INCOM), all ps< .05. Means and standard deviations for each of the measures are displayed in Table 2

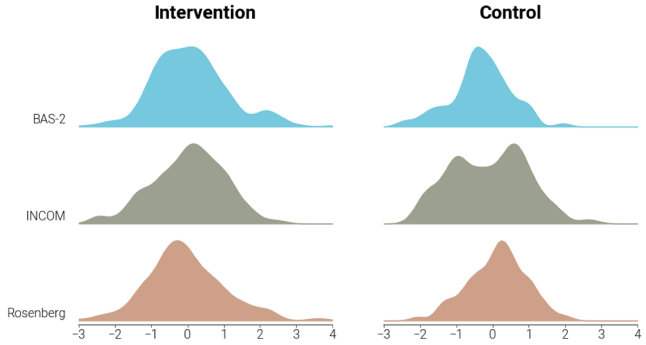

Figure 1: Probability distributions of the z-scored BAS-2, RSES, and INCOM results in relation to the intervention type. The relative distributions of the intervention and control groups highlight that seeing an intervention improved body acceptance across scales.

Although an independent samples t-test revealed that male-identifying participants had a higher average body image across conditions, $t(318)$ = 14.65, p< .01, the pattern of results reported above was observed for both genders when tested separately. Additionally, a two-way ANOVA comparing intervention type (intervention or control) and gender (male or female) did not show a main effect of gender or an interaction between gender and intervention type for any of the three outcome measures, all ps> .05.

These findings were also robust to demographic differences. When participant age, subjective socio-economic status, level of education, and gender were entered into an OLS regression model, condition (entered as a categorical predictor) remained a significant predictor of BAS-2 scores, p< .001. Gender was the only predictive demographic factor, p< .05. When social media use frequency, measured using Guess *et al*'s method,[44] was entered into the model, it was not predictive.

Table 2: Means and standard deviations for each intervention condition.

	BAS-2		INCOM		Rosenberg	
Intervention Type	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Deontological	23.01	6.01	44.27	8.63	22.32	3.75
Consequentialist	19.15	4.60	42.22	9.50	20.62	4.19
Control intervention	18.77	3.92	44.99	10.15	20.92	4.49
No intervention	16.16	4.17	40.55	10.17	18.97	3.19

Discussion

In this research, the two hypotheses were that 1) the interventions would positively affect body acceptance across both genders; and 2) the moral interventions would be particularly effective. The results that were obtained and analyzed supported the hypotheses, demonstrating that interventions are an effective and applicable tool to address body image issues. Moreover, the wide-reaching variables of self-esteem and social comparison were positively impacted, indicating the efficacy of interventions in addressing the foundational causes of poor mental health. The results also supported the superiority of moral interventions over the control variables; deontological nudges, in particular, were shown to be the most successful.

While this research yielded new insights and supported the existing literature about interventions, it was limited by certain factors. For example, the lasting effects of the intervention were not tested, and therefore the benefits might only be short-term. The durability of the increased body positivity, self-esteem, and decreased self-comparison was also not measured; outside factors could potentially weaken the intervention's positive effects. Additionally, though real Instagram posts were shown to the study participants, other variables could mitigate the effect of the intervention in a real-life setting.

Future research should focus on measuring the long-term impact and the durability of moral interventions. In addition, more research should be conducted to measure the efficacy of moral interventions on peer posts (non-influencer), with a closer simulation of the Instagram user experience.

All of the outcomes measured were trait-based and the research design did not include any state-based assessment of participants' body image concerns. While it is important to demonstrate changes in trait measures following an intervention, one limitation of the present research which could be addressed by future work is the lack of measurement of any state-level changes brought about by the body image interventions.

A final limitation of the present work is that it did not precisely balance the language of the different interventions. For instance, the deontological intervention includes language which makes the "online environment" immediately salient, whereas the other interventions do not. Similarly, the

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sentiment of the moral interventions is more positive than in the control intervention. Further work on the topic would benefit from normalizing and balancing the sentiment and content of the interventions.

Thus, although this research does not definitively provide a solution to body image issues on Instagram, it suggests an approach with known markers of success. Recent research corroborates the effectiveness of moral interventions in other realms (specifically, pertaining to a global health crisis).[22]

Conclusion

Negative body image is a widespread problem across society that can be exacerbated by Instagram usage. Ironically, it is necessary to look to Instagram for solutions. This research demonstrates that thoughtfully crafted interventions, particularly moral nudges grounded in deontology, can increase body acceptance among Instagram users. People can be influenced, as evidenced by the thousands of accounts successfully posting product recommendations to their devout followers; Instagram should harness the power of influence to counter negativity and spread positivity among its millions of users.

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