Exploring #nofilter Images When a Filter Has Been Used:
Filtering the Truth on Instagram Through a Mixed Methods Approach Using Netlytic and Photo Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Many social media users rely on photo editing techniques in order to receive more positive attention (i.e., likes/comments) online. This study used a mixed methods approach to conduct a descriptive analysis of #nofilter use by Instagram users. By using #nofilter users are making a point that they did not edit/manipulate their images. Of particular interest were those who used #nofilter but did filter their images. A text analysis of 18,366 images was conducted using Netlytic, revealing the largest content category as ‘appearance’. A content analysis was used to examine authors of #nofilter images whom did use a filter, and photo-coding scheme for this group of images was implemented. Of 18,366 images collected that used #nofilter, 12% (N=1630) did in fact use a filter. Listwise deletions were conducted and 1344 images remained. Results suggest the majority of accounts were personal, and belonged to females and of the images, majority had people in them. People using #nofilter do in fact filter their images and research into the reasons for deceit on social media is needed.

KEYWORDS

Body Dissatisfaction, Mixed Methods, Netlytic Software, Photo Alteration, Photo Analysis, Social Comparison Theory, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

Exposure to the media’s portrayal of the ideal body influences body dissatisfaction in males (Dakanalis et al., 2014; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2009; Rodgers, McLean & Paxton, 2015) and females (Dakanalis et al., 2014; Harper & Tiggemann, 2007; Mask & Blanchard, 2011). Body dissatisfaction in males may be due to the societal pressure (e.g., driven home by the media) to be muscular, mesomorphic (i.e., inverted triangle), and have low amounts of body fat (Lorenzen, Grieve & Thomas, 2004; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2005; Tylka, 2011). Whereas societal pressure to be thin and more recently to also be fit and muscular (which contradicts being thin to some extent) drives body dissatisfaction in women (Harper & Tiggemann, 2007; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). Unfortunately, striving for an unrealistic and, most often, unattainable body ideal has been shown to not only lead to body dissatisfaction but also decreased self-esteem and disordered eating habits, regardless of gender (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006; Hatoum & Belle, 2004; Slevec & Tiggemann, 2011).
Recent findings suggested that it is not only exposure to typical forms of media (i.e., television, magazines, etc.) but also social media (SM) that is creating these unattainable, media-reinforced, societal body ideals and, thus, potentially contributing to increased body dissatisfaction, decreased self-esteem, increased negative mood states, and increased disordered eating behaviours (Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian & Halliwell, 2015; Lewallen & Behm-Morawitz, 2016; Kim & Chock, 2015; Sidani, Shensa, Hoffman, Hanmer & Primack, 2016). In addition, unlike television and magazine viewing, SM allows for active engagement. For instance, SM users are able to create their own profiles and accounts, which allow them to post and/or share messages or images that represent themselves to the world as they see fit.

Although research into SM usage and its impact on users’ psychological and emotional states is still in its infancy, a few investigations have been focused around using the social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) to provide a potential explanation (Chae, 2016; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). The social comparison theory suggests that humans are constantly seeking ways to evaluate their own abilities, appearances, or opinions. In the absence of an objective way to do so, humans will subjectively compare their abilities and opinions to those of others who are similar to them (i.e., in age, gender, interests, etc.; Festinger, 1954). Unfortunately, this social comparison between ordinary people and the ideal body portrayed by the media creates an upward comparison that cannot be achieved, thus leading to negative psychosocial effects (Engeln-Maddox, 2005; Tiggemann & Polivy, 2010).

Similarly, with the rise in popularity of SM, users have a seemingly unlimited source of social comparisons. Chrisler, Fung, Lopez, and Gorman (2013) investigated Twitter user’s reactions to the 2011 Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show and found that there were many tweets that contained upward social comparisons to the fashion show models like “Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show. Just there to remind you that yes, you are still fat” and “I dunno why I’m watching this Victoria’s Secret fashion show. I can only fit the perfume”. However, not only can people compare themselves to celebrities in the media but social networking sites are unique in that users now have the ability to compare themselves and their appearance to friends, family, and acquaintances (Chua & Chang, 2016; Santarossa, Coyne, Lisinski & Woodruff, 2016).

Of particular interest is the social networking site Instagram and the psychosocial outcomes it can have on its users. Instagram is a SM network where users can take a picture and then post it for others to see. Although, before posting their photo, users are able to make many changes such as adding or removing borders, cropping, rotating, or straightening the photo, as well as applying a filter to make their photo look even better (Instagram, 2016). After posting their photo, other users (known as followers) can like or comment on the photo. This like or comment can represent peer acceptance, being seen as cool and popular, and potentially increase a user’s self-esteem (Burrow & Rainone, 2016; Sheldon & Byrant, 2016). Unfortunately, due to emphasis and importance society puts on the ideal body, many users are now relying on photo editing techniques, like filtering, in order to receive more positive attention (i.e., likes, comments). Chae (2016) found that females who spent more time on SM sites had increased behaviours of self-editing photos. In addition, two other studies found that those who engaged in photo editing behaviours were more likely to have greater body and eating concerns (McLean, Paxton, Wertheim & Masters, 2015; Santarossa, 2016). Although many photo-shopping apps like Visage Lab and Facetune exist, one of the easiest ways to edit a photo exists within Instagram. As previously mentioned, Instagram allows users to filter their pictures. These filters can alter pictures by intensifying shadows, brightening highlights, making the photo lighter, giving it a vintage look, smoothing/washing out skin tones, and countless other effects (Messiah, 2016).

Although research into why people filter their pictures is limited, a few suggestions have been made. One qualitative study in which participants were specifically asked their reasons for filtering pictures revealed that improving aesthetics (i.e., enhancing the photo and correcting for things like
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