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## **Instagram: What Makes You Post?**

Sarah Tyer

Pepperdine University

*Assigned in COM 300: Introduction to Communication Research (Delphine Broccard, Visiting Professor)*

### **Abstract**

This study aims to understand whether there is a relationship between what women view on Instagram and what they choose to post to their own personal accounts. The top three accounts on Instagram, belonging to Beyonce, Kim Kardashian and Ariana Grande, are believed to be large influencers over women who use the application, and reflect examples of society's "ideal woman." This research is a step towards the future of Social Media research, as Instagram has yet to be involved in a large number of studies. Sixty-five women ages 18-35 volunteered to take a survey, which posed multiple questions regarding their use and understanding of Instagram, the types of photos they post, and the motivation behind their posting habits. Results show that from the sampled population, there were not many individuals who actually follow the top three accounts on Instagram, which meant that those accounts did not actually have an influence over the types of photos the women were choosing to post.

*Keywords:* Instagram, "ideal woman," cultivation theory, social cognitive theory, self-presentation

### **Introduction**

Social Media has become a dominating force in today's society, and as the popularity of Facebook fades into the background, Instagram has become a new dominant platform. Instagram is an application, and a relatively new form of social media, which allows users to share photos that are often altered using filters, over the Internet with their friends, family and followers (Hoffman, 2012). Three women hold the top three accounts on Instagram, Beyonce, Kim Kardashian and Ariana Grande, all of whom share a common theme of posting sexy photos that portray them as the "ideal woman." The "ideal woman" is an idea that has been created by a male-dominated society that teaches women to view their bodies-as-object which is displayed through the ways they act and dress (Mask, Blanchard & Baker, 2014, p.277). In previous research conducted by Mask and colleagues (2014), women were exposed to advertisements displaying other women as "body-as-object" and "body-as-process" and concluded that women felt equally dissatisfied with their own appearances after viewing both types of portrayal.

It has been proven time and time again that people can be greatly influenced by the media they are exposed to, and the women in the advertisements are just one of many examples (Bassenoff, 2006). Cultivation theory examines these effects that large amounts of media intake can have on individuals and its ability to change people's concepts of reality (Morgan, 2010). When women are constantly exposed to other women in the media that portray the "ideal woman," they begin to want to emulate those same characteristics and become part of their 'ideal' worlds. The idea of the "ideal woman" is heavily represented on the social media platform Instagram. This study will explore the effect that exposure to the "ideal woman" on Instagram has on women's posting habits to their own personal account.

### **Review of Literature**

#### **Instagram**

Instagram is a form of social media that shares photos over the Internet through an application that allows users to alter their images by applying filters and sharing their photos on a variety of other social media platforms (Hoffman, 2012). Photos are usually changed or altered in order to garner more 'likes' from one's peers and followers. 'Likes' are a concept designed specifically for the realm of social media, which allows a person to signal their approval in material posted to another individual's social media portal. Social Media 'likes' are an indicator that a photo, message or link is of interest to other people and was able to attract attention (McPartland, 2013). The success of Instagram is largely due to our society's growing demand for access to social media and smart phones, as it is an application most often used through a cellular device (Sanvenero, 2013). Women are heavy users of Instagram, as it gives them a social link to their favorite celebrities and brands in one easy-to-use application. Celebrities have taken to Instagram as a way to connect with their fans, and keep their name and personal brands

relevant. A celebrity's relevance in today's society is very strongly correlated with the number of followers their page has on the application; the more followers they have the greater influence they have over current culture (Barmann, 2015). The top three Celebrities who currently hold the most followers on Instagram are Kim Kardashian at 27.6 million followers, Beyonce at 27.6 million followers and Ariana Grande at 26.4 million followers (Kosoff, 2015). Upon review of these three Instagram accounts it is easy to see a common thread woven between each one; sexy poses and photos.

In today's society, it is well known that sex sells and our media culture over the years has perpetuated this theme by presenting the idea of an "ideal woman." The term "ideal woman" is an idea created by a male dominated society that raises women to be socially taught to view themselves as "body-as-object" (Mask, Blanchard & Baker, 2014, p.277). The objectification of females has put pressures on women to place higher values on the appearance of, rather than the physical condition of, their bodies. The media is considered one of the strongest yet unwelcomed avenues of this message being spread to new generations of "appearance-related norms," and a societal routine of comparing one's own body to others based on its visual and sexual appeal (Mask, Blanchard & Baker, 2014). Kim Kardashian, Beyonce and Adriana Grande all fill the stereotype of an "ideal woman," as they are all in perfect shape (with the later two having an enviable hour-glass figure), beautiful with an extremely manicured look, stylish and sexy (Barr, 2015). Their 'looks' are examples of what white male gaze idealizes, and covets through their interactions with their photos on Instagram.

Instagram is a fairly new form of Social Media, one that currently has over 200 million active users, which leaves many researchers curious about the ramifications of using such technology. In a study conducted by Richard Sanvenero (2013), he aims his research towards uncovering the actual rights held by social media users in regards to their privacy and what can be used against them in court. He highlights the numerous "policy changes" that have taken affect over the years, and how the consumer is not always an educated consumer of these forms of media. He concludes that social media users need to take extra precautions as to what they post online and what they give applications access to, such as their 'current location.' Location services are normally enabled on an individual's cellular device, which uses cellular data, Wi-Fi and Global Positioning Systems to determine one's location (iOS 5: Understanding Location Services, 2015). Unless an individual turns these services off, applications (such as Instagram) are able to access this information, which could possibly raise issues regarding an individual's security. As this subject still presents many gray areas, it is best that people be their own best advocates.

If consumers are not careful, they can be mentally affected by the content they consume as well. Lisa Mask and colleagues (2014) conducted a study in which they recruited 91 predominantly Caucasian women with an average BMI of 23.35. They showed them a variety of advertisements, some which focused solely on the body-as-object, some that highlighted the "body-as-process" (p. 277), which featured healthy physically fit women, and others that did not focus on the body at all. The advertisements were all judged based on appeal, pleasantness, product clarity, favorability, and positivity. Researchers hypothesized that the women would have positive feelings about their bodies after watching the "body-as-process" videos and negative feelings after the "body-as-object" videos. The results of this study, however, showed that women felt equally dissatisfied with their physical appearance after both types of advertisements while the body-free advertisements were completely neutral (Mask, Blanchard & Baker, 2014).

### **Cultivation Theory**

The influence of the media over how people think and feel is not a new concept; it has been a topic of study since the media began becoming a prominent part of our culture (Morgan, 2010). Cultivation theory examines such effects of large amounts of media intake and the ability it has to change people's concepts of reality (Morgan, 2010). It is believed that the more people are exposed to the socially constructed realities that they experience in the media, the more likely they are to perceive that as reality. This concept is applicable for fans following their favorite celebrities on social media platforms; it constructs a false feeling of a reality in which they perceive the beauty, body and lifestyle of their favorite celebrities as attainable in their own lives.

Traditionally, cultivation theory is directly related to the effects of television viewing with attempts to understand the connection between what people watch and what they believe to be true or reality. Jae Eun Chung (2014) conducted a study to see how cultivation theory could explain people's beliefs about medical history after watching medical dramas. The hypothesis of the study stated that "Heavy viewing of medical television dramas will be associated with more fatalistic beliefs about illness," and the study involved a national sample of adults in the United States (Chung, 2014, p.337). A survey analysis was administered to question participants on their medical history and knowledge, and their television viewing habits (Chung, 2014). The results of this research showed that there is a correlation between heavier television viewing and adult's false beliefs about health.

### **Social Cognitive Theory**

The media clearly has a strong influence on what one thinks and how one perceives reality. With an ever-changing media environment leaning more heavily on a socially constructed content atmosphere, it raises the question as to why we imitate what we learn or see. Social Cognitive Theory analyzes the mental processes of gaining knowledge and understanding behaviors learned through experiences (Swearer, 2014). The interactions of one's social environment, internal stimuli and behaviors lead people to make subconscious notes as to the behaviors learned and their resulting outcomes (Swearer, 2014). Swearer (2014) conducted a report analyzing social cognitive theory and its association with bullying. Bullying is believed to be a behavior learned and studies show a direct correlation between heightened cases of bullying and less safe living environments. Children who are exposed to bullying, aggressive behaviors, and crime are more likely to bully others, since it is a behavior learned through their experience (Swearer, 2014).

Social cognitive theory helps to explain the reasons people act and react in the ways that they do, as it points to outside factors that influence behavior. Learned behavior has taken on new forms with the introduction of Social Media to our society. People are now not only influenced by their real world social environments, but by their social media environments as well. If learned behavior by external stimuli is how one understands to conduct themselves in real life situations, it is only natural that one also learns how to present themselves through social media through learned behaviors and trends.

Self-presentation is the way in which one chooses to present him/herself to others. In social media, it is a digitally constructed reality that usually highlights "social connectedness and treasured aspects of themselves" (Toma, 2013, p.201). It becomes a balancing act of placing extra emphasis on flattering images and lifestyle while discouraging blatant lies, since an individual also has social connections with friends in real life. In 2013, Catalina Toma conducted a study to observe the effect that viewing one's own social media profile had on an individual. Participants either were shown their own profile briefly, or that of another human. The results showed that people had a significant boost in self-esteem after viewing flattering pictures of themselves on their own profiles. Self-esteem is an inner view of one's self that reflects their beliefs as to their own value and worth as a person. A person's calculations of their own self-esteem is based upon many things including their looks, relationships, accomplishments and confidence levels. It is a concept that is created internally, yet can be influenced by outside factors (Floyd, 2011).

The data collected led researchers to the conclusion that "Facebook profile browsing benefits users by elevating their self-esteem, both compared to viewing the profile of an average stranger ... and to looking at one's own image in a mirror" (Toma, 2013, p.212). This surge in Facebook-viewing self-esteem, however, also showed to reduce participant's ability to think immediately afterwards. The researchers discovered that the reduction in cognitive abilities is directly linked to motivation, "When media content features the self as protagonist and does so in an enhancing and accurate fashion, it appears to tap into motivational processes that, in turn, affect cognitive performance" (Toma, 2013, p.212). Inevitably, social media is changing the way people, especially women, view themselves and the way they want to appear to others in their digital social circle.

### **Our Study**

Our study will address the motivations behind the content women choose to post on Instagram. Through the lens of cultivation theory and social cognitive theory, social media and the act of following other influential women such as Kim Kardashian, Beyonce and Ariana Grande have a large impact on what women choose to post on their own Instagram accounts. Women's exposure to the sexy, altered photos that these "influencers" post establishes the idea that that is what is accepted and valued by society. The study will examine whether women then follow suit of these influential Instagram accounts and post sexy photos of their own.

**Research Question.** RQ: Does the "ideal woman" portrayed through Instagram have a direct correlation to the photos women choose to post on their personal accounts?

### **Method**

#### **Participants and Procedure**

A convenience-volunteer sample of 65 women between the ages 18 and 35 who use Instagram, a social media application based on sharing pictures, were surveyed in this study. The participants were asked to take a cross-sectional survey and were divided into four different age categories, 18-21 (64.6%), 22-25 (23.1%), 26-29 (4.6%), 30-35 (7.7%). The survey was used in the study to assess whether the "ideal woman" portrayed through Instagram pages and postings, cultivation theory, and social cognitive theory influenced the photos posted by the

women surveyed. The online survey was posted to the researchers personal Facebook accounts, as well as distributed to students on campus through the discretion of Communication professors.

### Materials

The survey was distributed through the electronic survey generator, Google Forms, which was used to create the questions and administered them to participants at no cost to the researchers. There were no other materials needed to conduct this study.

### Measures

**Instagram.** Instagram “allows users to take a filtered photo through the app (or filter a photo already stored on their device) and share it with their social network on Instagram and post directly to Facebook” (Alper, 2013, p.1235). Participants in the study were asked various open and close ended questions based upon their use of the Social Media application. Most of the close ended questions in the survey provided an ordinal scale for participants to answer the questions based on their usage. Samples of these questions (see appendix A) include: “Do you use Instagram?”, “How many times do you check Instagram a day?”, and “How often do you post on Instagram?”.

**Ideal Woman.** Within the portrayal of the “ideal woman” in Northern America, it is common for women to be depicted as thin and young and focus on certain body parts that make them attractive such as their legs and breasts. This level of attractiveness is desired but unattainable to most (Mask, Blanchard, & Baker, 2014). The survey included two nominal questions regarding body image and the perception of the ideal woman. The first question asked was: “Out of the top three accounts on Instagram which accounts do you follow?”. The survey asked participants to identify which celebrity they followed (if any): Ariana Grande, Kim Kardashian, and Beyonce. Participants were also asked: “Do you feel that women are overly sexualized on Instagram?”

**Cultivation Theory.** Cultivation theory is the process by which media influences its users and the ways in which these manifest themselves in their personal lives and their worldviews (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). By using the definition given by Morgan & Shanahan questions were developed and asked of participants in a categorical open ended manner such as, “How do you choose the accounts you follow?”, “What are the top three accounts that you are most likely to view on Instagram?”, and “What do you feel you gain from using Instagram?”.

**Social Cognitive Theory.** Social cognitive theory is the notion that we learn by watching modeled behavior of others, and then proceed to use this witnessed behavior in our own lives. Social cognitive theory also states how media can teach, inform, reinforce and prompt behaviors of those who consume certain media outlets (Larose, 2009) To measure how this modeled behavior affected the participants categorical open ended questions such as, “Do you use any of these Instagram accounts as a form of daily motivation?,” “Do you think that the accounts you follow affect your posting habits?”, and finally, “What types of pictures do your friends post?” were asked. For the final question, a list of suggestions was given for participants to select all the photograph categories that applied to the pictures posted by their friends.

**Self-presentation.** Catalina Toma (2013) explains that we present ourselves in front of our ‘audience’ of family, friends and acquaintances in specific ways in hopes of presenting our best selves through images that are attractive, truthful and can be easily verified by those in the audience. An ordinal scale based question was administered to determine how often participants posted on Instagram and a nominal scale based question was posed to analyze the types of photos posted. Questions included how often participants posted ‘selfies’ as well as the types of photos posted to their own accounts. The participants were given multiple categories to choose from to answer these questions such as: scenic, landscape, animals/pets, fitness, sexy, etc.

**Demographics.** Participants were asked for their gender and only women were allowed to continue the survey. Then questions relating to age range were asked to determine where the participants fell in the study’s expressed bracket; within the ages of 18-35. (64.6%) of participants were within 18-21yrs old, (23.1%) were 22-25, (4.6%) were 26-29, and (7.7%) were 30-35.

### Results

The study posed the question whether there was a positive correlation between subjects studied (women between the ages of 18-35), and their exposure to the “ideal woman” on Instagram and their posting habits. The majority of the participants of the survey (76.9%) did not follow the top three accounts on Instagram (Beyonce, Kim Kardashian and Ariana Grande) that actually portray the over-sexualized “ideal woman.” Personal posting habits of the women surveyed showed that 52.3% posted group photos, 38.5% posted scenic photos and 33.8% posted lifestyle photos. Only 3.1% of participants reported posting sexy photos and 9.2% reported posting bathing suit photos to their own accounts.

## Discussion

### Implications

The top three accounts on Instagram at the time the study was conducted were held by Kim Kardashian (27.6 million followers), Beyonce (27.6 million followers), and Ariana Grande (26.4 million followers) (Kosoff, 2015). The study revealed that based on these top three accounts on Instagram, the majority (76.9%) of participants in the study did not actually follow these “ideal women.” Only 15.4% of participants followed Beyonce and Kim Kardashian while a marginal 7.7% followed Ariana Grande. Although 63.1% of participants agreed that women are over-sexualized on Instagram, results showed that this factor did not influence the material they posted to their own accounts. Participants reported mostly following accounts related to humor (38.5%), lifestyle (30.8%), fashion (30.8%) and celebrities (30.8%) out of sixteen possible categories. Furthermore, survey results showed that the categories in which participants most often posted to their own Instagram accounts tended to be group (52.3%), scenic (38.5%) and lifestyle (33.8%). These numbers revealed that there was not any correlation between the content women chose to follow on Instagram and what types of photos they posted to their own accounts.

Previous research showed strong evidence supporting Cultivation Theory, which explains the influence the media has on its users, however our research did not support this idea. Cultivation theory examines the effects that large amounts of media intake have on a person’s concept of reality (Morgan, 2010). The more people are exposed to the socially constructed realities they experience in the media, the more likely they are to perceive that as reality (Morgan, 2010). Almost half (47.7%) of women surveyed reported that the accounts they viewed did not have an effect on the pictures they chose to post on their own accounts. Participants did, however, state that women were over sexualized on Instagram (63.1%). Research conducted Lisa Mask and colleagues (2014) exposed participants to images of women in which they were projected as “body-by-process” and “body-as-object” and concluded that women were equally dissatisfied with their own personal appearance after both types of advertising. Therefore, the concluding data shows an inconsistency between their self-reported beliefs on the over-sexualized “ideal woman” present on Instagram, the types of accounts they follow and their own posting habits.

### Strengths and Weaknesses

One of the strengths of this research was that the study aimed to survey a broad range of young women (18-35 years old) who tended to be frequent Instagram users, and results showed a representative population. Since our survey was strictly volunteer based, there was always the possibility of reaching a population that was not as active on Instagram, which would have been a hindrance to our concluding data. The method in which we posted the survey allowed for our target population to be exposed to the Instagram community directly, therefore fewer exited the survey due to non-Instagram use. The second strength of this study was that it attempted to dive into the effects of a new Social Media phenomenon that has yet to be extensively researched. Although there have been studies conducted on the effects that other Social Media sites have on its’ users, such as Facebook, there is extremely limited research pertaining to Instagram specifically. This study opened up a relatively new sector of Social Media for further investigation.

Although data collected was from a representative population of young female frequent Instagram users, the majority of this population reached did not, in fact, follow the top three accounts on Instagram that present the “ideal woman” which was a weakness of the study. The survey was created with the notion that participants would actually follow the top three Instagram accounts, and subsequent questions were created with this assumption in mind. Since the majority of the sampled population did not follow these accounts, there was a major inconsistency in our data compared to what was believed to be the outcome. Results, in turn, also showed that since the participants were not viewing these accounts, their own posting habits were not effected. The second weakness of this study was the smaller sample size. Although the study was able to reach a fair amount of young women (65), a larger population size would have been ideal to truly support the data. Had there not been an age restriction placed on survey participants, a larger sample size would have been obtained. A younger demographic would have been more likely to follow Kim Kardashian, Beyonce and Ariana Grande.

### Future Research

Using a purposive sample and triangulating the data collected against participants actual accounts could be used in future research. By seeking out participants that heavily use Instagram and administering a more in-depth survey, researchers could gain a better understanding of their posting and viewing habits by also analyzing the participant’s personal accounts. By studying the photos the participants choose to post and comparing them to the accounts that they follow, the self-reporting bias we received when collecting our data would be removed. A more

qualitative approach to the study could give a clearer picture of the photos women of this age group choose to post, and how these images compare to those of the celebrities and influential accounts that they follow.

Extending the research to be categorized by the participants' location could also expand this study. There is the possibility that the influence of various accounts varies from state to state, country to country. By categorizing participants into specific regions, it would be informative to better understand trends and influences of specific geographic regions. Since the study of Instagram is a new concept, it will be interesting to see where future research takes this topic.

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**Appendix A**

**Consent Form for Participation in a Research Study  
Pepperdine University**

**Instagram: What Makes You Post?**

**Description of the research and your participation**

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Sarah Tyer. The purpose of this research is to analyze the effects of Instagram on one's posting habits.

Your participation will involve completing a survey hosted by Google Forms for use in an academic setting.

**Risks and discomforts**

There are no known risks associated with this research. The information you provide will be kept anonymous and will be used solely for academic research purposes.

**Potential benefits**

There are no known benefits to you that would result from your participation in this research.

**Protection of confidentiality**

Your identity will not be revealed in any publication resulting from this study.

**Voluntary participation**

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate and you may withdraw your consent to participate at any time. You will not be penalized in any way should you decide not to participate or to withdraw from this study.

**Contact information**

If you have any questions or concerns about this study or if any problems arise, please contact Sarah Tyer at Pepperdine University at [Sarah.Tyer@pepperdine.edu](mailto:Sarah.Tyer@pepperdine.edu). If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact Professor Delphine Broccard at [Delphine.Broccard@pepperdine.edu](mailto:Delphine.Broccard@pepperdine.edu).

**Consent**

I understand to my satisfaction the information regarding participation in this research study. I affirm that I am at least 18 years old, and I hereby consent to participate in the research described above.

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B

## Survey

## 1. What is your age?

(Please select one)

*Mark only one oval.*

- Under 18
- 18-21
- 22-25
- 26-29
- 30-35
- 36 & Over

## 2. Do you use Instagram? PLEASE EXIT SURVEY IF NO

(Please select one)

*Mark only one oval.*

- yes
- no

## 3. How often do you view your newsfeed on Instagram?

(Please select one)

*Mark only one oval.*

- Never
- Monthly
- Weekly
- Once a Day
- Multiple times a day

## 4. If you use Instagram daily, how many times do you check it?

(Please select one)

*Mark only one oval.*

- N/A
- 1-2
- 3-4
- 5-6
- 7+

## 5. How often do you post photos on Instagram?

(Please select one)

*Mark only one oval.*

- Never
- Monthly
- Weekly
- Daily
- Multiple Times a Day

## 6. Out of these three people, who do you follow on Instagram?

(Please check all that apply)

*Check all that apply.*

- Ariana Grande
- Kim Kardashian
- Beyonce
- None of the Above

**7. What content determines the Instagram accounts you follow?**

(Please select all that apply)

*Check all that apply.*

- Scenic
- Selfies
- Sport
- Explore Page
- Landscape
- Humor
- Religion
- Animals/Pets
- Food
- Fitness
- Lifestyle
- Celebrities
- Quotes
- Sexy
- Fashion
- Bathing Suit/ Beach
- Travel
- Other

**8. What are the top three types of accounts that you are most likely to view on Instagram?**

(Please select all that apply)

*Check all that apply.*

- Scenic
- Selfies
- Sports
- Landscape
- Humor
- Religion
- Animals/Pets
- Food
- Fitness
- Lifestyle
- Celebrities
- Quotes
- Sexy
- Fashion
- Bathing Suit/ Beach
- Travel

**9. Do you use any of these accounts as a form of daily motivation?**

(Please select one)

*Mark only one oval.*

- Yes
- No

**10. Are women overly sexualized on Instagram?**

*Mark only one oval.*

- Yes
- No

**11. Why do you Instagram?**

(Please select all that apply)  
*Check all that apply.*

- Motivation
- Humor
- Advice
- Entertainment
- Promote Yourself
- News
- Stay Connected to Friends
- Filter Options
- Something to do in uncomfortable situations
- Looking up Products
- Other

**12. How often do you post selfies?**

(Please select one)  
*Mark only one oval.*

- Never
- Monthly
- Weekly
- Daily
- Multiple Times a Day

**13. Do you think that the types of accounts you follow effect your posting habits?**

(Please select one)  
*Mark only one oval.*

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

**14. If you selected yes/sometimes, which of these effect your posting habits?**

(Please select all that apply)  
*Check all that apply.*

- Scenic
- Selfies
- Sports
- Landscape
- Humor
- Religion
- Animals/ Pets
- Group
- Food
- Fitness
- Lifestyle
- Celebrities
- Quotes
- Sexy Photos
- Fashion

**15. What types of pictures do you most often post?**

(Please select all that apply)  
*Check all that apply.*

- Scenic
- Selfies
- Landscape
- Humor
- Animals/Pets
- Group
- Fitness
- Lifestyle
- Quotes
- Sexy
- Bathing Suit/ Beach