

Is that selfie edited? Why it may matter for women viewers

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There's a surprising upside to the fact that many people edit their selfies on Instagram and other social media sites to enhance their appearance.

A new study found that when women believed that selfies of thin and sexualized women had been edited, viewing these images had less negative impact on one aspect of their mental health.

Many studies have found that viewing thin and sexualized images of models or others can lead women to put more value on being slender themselves—a line of thinking called thin ideal internalization, said Megan Vendemia, lead author of the study and doctoral candidate in communication at The Ohio State University.

This internalization can in turn lead to eating disorders or other psychological problems.

But this study found that women were less likely to internalize the thin ideal if they believed the pictures they viewed were edited.

"Women see the edited photos as less authentic and it reduces the negative effect these images can have on them," Vendemia said.

"They know that the online images might not reflect an offline reality."

The study also found that [participants](#) judged women negatively for sharing edited pictures of themselves online. Furthermore, participants evaluated the women who shared the thin, sexualized images more negatively when they believed the women were peers instead of models.

Vendemia conducted the study with David DeAndrea, associate professor of communication at Ohio State. It appears online in the journal *Body Image* and will be published in a future print edition.

The research involved 360 female college students from one university who were told the study was designed to determine how people evaluate images that appear on popular social media sites like Instagram.

They all viewed the same 45 selfies, taken from public Instagram accounts, of thin women in revealing clothing. Some of the photos had icons, placed by the researchers, that indicated the image was edited in Photoshop and/or included an Instagram filter.

Half of the women were told that the images were of other students at their college, while the others were told the images depicted New York City models.

And half of each of these groups saw collections in which nearly all the photos were marked as being edited. The others saw collections containing only a few photos labeled as edited.

All participants then completed a variety of measures, including one on thin ideal internalization. This asked how much they agreed with statements like "Thin women are more attractive than other women."

Results showed that the more that participants perceived that the photos were edited, the less they internalized the thin ideal. As expected, participants were more likely to believe the photos labeled as edited had been modified. But they also thought many of the non-labeled photos were edited.

"The photos are less influential if women see them as being edited," Vendemia said. "So cues that images have been altered could potentially reduce the negative effects of thin ideal [images](#)."

The more that the viewers thought the selfies were modified, the more they thought the women took their photos just to show off, to make others jealous and to brag, results showed. Participants also rated the women with edited photos as less intelligent and less honest.

And participants gave harsher evaluations to their peers than they did for

models.

"Participants tended to be more forgiving of professional models than their own peers on social media sites for the exact same behavior," she said.

"They thought models were sharing selfies for more altruistic reasons, such as to motivate others or promote health."

The results suggest that women should be cautious about what selfies they share of themselves on social media.

"You may not get the same positive reaction from your friends as would a [model](#) who posted a very similar picture," Vendemia said.

But the good news of this study is that as social media users become more sophisticated in how they view [photos](#), they may be able to avoid some pitfalls.

"Just being aware of the amount of photo editing that goes on diminishes [women's](#) endorsement of the thin ideal when they view pictures of slender people," she said.

More information: Megan A. Vendemia et al, The effects of viewing thin, sexualized selfies on Instagram: Investigating the role of image source and awareness of photo editing practices, *Body Image* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.bodyim.2018.08.013](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2018.08.013)

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