how often, a phenomenon occurs in everyday life or whether a phenomenon has the same effects when it occurs naturally as when it is evoked. Studies of casual “fat talk” (e.g., Engeln-Maddox, Salk, & Miller, 2012) indicate that women and girls do make upward social comparisons to attractive peers and celebrities that imply body dissatisfaction or even shame (e.g., “I wish my abs looked like hers”; p. 176). An ecological momentary assessment study (Leahey, Crowther, & Mickelson, 2007) showed that women who made upward social comparisons also reported higher negative affect and body dissatisfaction, as well as more thoughts about the need to exercise. Vulnerable women (i.e., those who had reported high body image concerns prior to the study) also reported more thoughts about dieting after making upward comparisons. Other recent studies (e.g., Leahey, Crowther, & Ciesla, 2011; Meyers, Ridolfi, Crowther, & Ciesla, 2012) have also demonstrated naturally occurring social comparisons and their relationship to body image concerns.

The Present Study

Twitter has grown rapidly in popularity, and is used by a diverse population to share thoughts and immediate reactions to news and sports events, entertainment, celebrity gossip, and personal experiences (Gillen & Merchant, 2013) either publicly or with one’s network of followers. Twitter is an electronic conversation in which anyone can join, as well as a form of diary, in which one’s thoughts and experiences are recorded and shared. Scholars have begun to use Twitter as a research tool (e.g., Thornton, 2013; Wiseman & Watt, 2010), both as a method for gathering data (e.g., sending a tweet to invite participation in a study) and as a source of data (e.g., analyzing the content of a sample of tweets). In the present study, we analyzed the content of tweets sent by Twitter users about the 2011 Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show. Comments about television shows are common on Twitter, and they constitute a way of watching television with friends who are not present. The show was chosen because it is popular with adolescents and young adults (http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/showtracker/2011/11/victorias-secret-fashion-show-shows-ratings-legs-for-cbs.html); college students often gather to watch it in groups (see, for example, Nordhoff, 2011). The models are known to be very attractive and their outfits especially sexy, which we thought might make them particularly likely targets for social comparison.

The content of the tweets was examined with two research questions in mind. First, we looked for evidence that Twitter users actually made explicit social comparisons to the models; we were interested in both upward social comparisons, which might make viewers of the show feel worse about themselves, as well as downward social comparisons (i.e., derogating the models), which might make the viewers feel better about themselves. Second, we expected that the tweets would provide evidence to support the results of experimental studies of body image effects of viewing idealized media images (e.g., body image concerns; disordered eating; negative affect; thoughts about food, dieting, weight, and exercise).

Materials

Twitter.com. This social-networking, microblogging website, developed in 2006, allows individuals to post and read messages composed of 140 or fewer characters. These messages are referred to as “tweets.” Users interact with each other by sending tweets and following others’ accounts. Because of Twitter’s efficiency and speed, tweets can reveal trends in popular culture and current events (Picard, 2011).

Topsy.com. Topsy Labs, Inc. (www.topsylabs.com) collects data from a variety of social networks and Internet sources to present trends and information that are relevant to specific topic searches. This real-time search engine allows users to access information from specific sites, of specific types (e.g., tweets, videos), and during certain periods of time.

Procedure

Topsy.com was used to access and code public tweets posted on Twitter.com on the date and during the hours mentioned above. We used the keywords “Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show.” An initial list of coding categories was devised based on a review of the literature and an initial reading of a subset of the tweets. Additional categories were added as more tweets were read. All tweets received more than one code, as all were coded for perception of the show, and many also fit into one or more other categories (e.g., “Eating a burrito then watching the Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show then crying while vomiting while slashing my wrists with a Gillette Venus”).

Two of the authors read and coded each tweet independently. The initial inter-rater reliability was 95.57%. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved by all four authors to yield 100% agreement.

Coding

Perception of the show. Each tweet was coded for the user’s perception of the show as either positive, negative, or neutral/not applicable based on the content and tone of the tweet.

Celebrity/model/performance. This code signifies a comment about a specific model’s or musician’s performance or the appearance of a celebrity in the show.

Personal. This code refers to tweets about a user’s personal experience, such as a statement that the user was watching the show.

Quality of the show. This code refers to specific comments about the quality of the show, such as praise (e.g., successful show), critique (e.g., displeasure with the show or fashions), and neutral/other (e.g., “Don’t know why she calls it her secret. Almost everything also show”).

Foreign language. This code is for tweets in languages other than English.

Advertisements. Advertisements for the television show, for Victoria’s Secret clothing and stores, and for related giveaways and activities were categorized under this code.

Photos/videos. Tweets in which users posted hyperlinks to photographs or videos that related to the fashion show were coded in this category.

Feminist. A few tweets critiqued the show from a feminist perspective, such as the objectified portrayals of the models and/or the sexist/self-objectifying messages the show sends to viewers (e.g., “Thank you Victoria’s Secret fashion show for making girls across the country feel insecure by promoting the unattainable ideal of perfection”).

1 All tweets presented here are quoted exactly as they were written; users’ names are not included to protect their privacy.
Eating disorder. This code was used to classify tweets that made specific references to an eating disorder or a disordered eating behavior.

Body positive. Some users posted encouraging and uplifting tweets, such as encouraging women to realize that there are many ways to be beautiful.

Social comparison. Tweets that referenced an evaluation of the user’s own body were coded as social comparison. The tweets in this category were divided into three subcategories: (1) upward social comparison, in which the user perceived the models to have higher social status than she did or their bodies to be superior to her own, (2) downward social comparison, in which the user perceived the models to have lower social status than she did or in which the user explicitly recommended that women dissociate themselves from the models as a means of self-defense or increasing self-regard, (3) body-related comments in which it was difficult to perceive what kind of comparison the user was making.

Sex. This code was used for tweets that reflected the sexualized nature of the fashion show, such as crudely sexual comments about the models, and users’ comments on their own sexuality or sexiness.

Food/drink. Tweets that contained any reference to food or drink were classified in this category, including drinking games (e.g., drinking whenever a model wears a certain color or whenever a model winks at the camera).

Weight. Tweets about weight concern the models’ body size or the users’ own weight.

Clothing. Tweets that explicitly mentioned interest in the fashions displayed by the models were coded as clothing.

Self-harm. Tweets that reference self-injury or suicide were coded in this category.

Political. A few tweets referred to politicians or political events that were current at the time of the show.

Tweets about tweets. A few tweets that referred to other Twitter users tweeting about the show were coded in this category.

Results and Discussion

Although the majority of tweets were idiosyncratic remarks, retweets, and comments about the quality of the show and related advertising, many tweets contain evidence of upward or downward social comparisons to the fashion models. There were tweets about the models themselves and about body image, eating disorders, weight, desires for food or alcohol, and urges to commit self-harm. The number (and percent of the total) of tweets in each category is presented in Table 1.

Despite the show’s popularity, there were significantly more neutral than positive perceptions of it, \( x^2 (2, N = 977) = 561.51, p < .001 \). Only 10% of tweets reported a negative perception of the show (e.g., “NOT watching the Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show. Sorry, I don’t like to watch bunch of starving girls who think their pretty walk around”). Twenty-two (22%) of the 65 tweets that mentioned the quality of the show were critical (e.g., “The Victoria’s Secret fashion show teaches us tons of valuable lessons like: No excuses, play like a bitch”). If we add the few tweets that contained a feminist critique (e.g., “Fuck the Victoria’s Secret fashion show and the culture it perpetuates”) or a body-positive comment (e.g., “just cause you aren’t on the victoria’s secret fashion show, doesn’t mean you aren’t beautiful. #ThingsIveRealized”; “Before the Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show even starts…Ladies, you are perfect and beautiful the way you are!”) and the few that evidenced a downward social comparison to the models (e.g., “She’s like not even that pretty”; “To all my female followers watching the Victoria’s Secret fashion show tonight, remember: real men go for meat. Only dogs go for bones”) to the critical comments on the quality of the show, we see that a small minority (approximately 5%) of the tweets are attempts to derogate the models themselves, or the sexualization/objectification of the models, or the general idea of a fashion show.

Some of the downward social comparisons and body-positive comments appear to have been written by men.\(^2\) Thus, there is little evidence in this sample that women are spontaneously making downward social comparisons or using affirmative statements to make themselves feel better. Of course, those who might be inclined to use these sorts of tactics to maintain or improve their self-regard might also avoid watching a television show that they know they would dislike or that might make them feel bad about themselves. However, given the popularity of the show among young people and the tendency to gather together on college campuses to watch the show in groups, it is likely that some women who would prefer to avoid the show end up being subjected to it.

Seventy-five (90%) of the 83 tweets about body image suggest upward social comparisons to the models; many of the users who wrote these tweets seemed to be women who thought that they suffered by comparison to the models (e.g., “The Victoria’s Secret fashion show = an hour to feel bad about yourself”; “Every girl is going to feel like shit after watching the victoria’s secret fashion show”; “Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show. Just there to remind you that yes, you are still fat”). Approximately 13% of tweets concerned weight (e.g., “I dunno why I’m watching this Victoria’s Secret fashion show. I can only fit the perfume”; “Watching the Victoria’s Secret fashion show in the common room. #thinspiration”), food/drink (e.g., “Eating Ben & Jerry’s while watching Victoria’s

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\(^2\) Although it is not possible to be certain of the gender of any Twitter user, these users’ identifications included masculine names (e.g., Mike, Andrew, Caleb).

\(^3\) The word “thinspiration” refers to motivation to start or maintain a very strict diet. It is commonly used on “pro-ana” blogs and websites.
Secret Fashion Show. Is that an oxymoron?; “My idea of productive is watching the Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show while eating a dinner of celery and diet green tea”), and eating disorders or disordered eating behavior (e.g., “My adderol diet starts tomorrow”); “The Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show is pretty much the Super Bowl of bulimia isn’t it?”; “Everyone watching the Victoria’s secret fashion show is gonna bring a whole new level of anorexia to the 717”). Most disturbing were the small number of tweets that mentioned self-harm (e.g., “time to slit my wrists [watching The Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show 2011]”); “VICTORIA’S SECRET FASHION SHOW DRINKING GAME: drink every time you want to kill yourself!”; “Just wondering how many girls are committing suicide after watching the Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show. So much for studying. #GSUProblems”).

Tweets coded in the Sex category included sexual comments related to viewing the models (e.g., “Happy National Stay in Your Room and Jerk It Day [aka: The Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show?”), comments that suggest worry about how men will view them after having seen the models (e.g., “All I have to say is, my boyfriend better NOT be at his house watching the Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show”), and comments related to pornography or other activity (e.g., “If you’re watching the Victoria’s Secret Fashion show right now, you either need to go find a porn or hang on to the one you already have”). Do the dudes watching the Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show know about all of the free books available 24 h a day on the Internet? The comments illustrate the sexual objectification of women portrayed on the show, and some suggest another form of upward social comparison (i.e., Am I sexy enough?).

The tweets in our sample show evidence of fat talk (Englin-Maddox et al., 2012), especially those coded in the “weight,” “food,” and “eating disorder” categories. The tweets also support the results of ecological momentary assessment studies (e.g., Leahey et al., 2007) in that viewing the models (and making explicit or implicit social comparisons to them) is associated with thoughts about body dissatisfaction and dieting. If our Twitter users expected to tweet about the show, then their plan to form and transmit a comment required the deeper processing that has been shown to lead to body dissatisfaction in laboratory studies.

Our study has obvious limitations, as the data come only from Twitter users who chose to tweet about the show. Users may differ in a variety of ways from those who have not chosen to subscribe to Twitter, and those users who chose to tweet about the show may differ from users who did not. Perhaps users watching alone, without the social support of friends, were more likely to tweet about negative feelings about themselves or their bodies, eating comfort foods, or wanting to diet or harm themselves. However, some tweets did suggest or state that the user is watching in a group (e.g., “Watching it with my ladies eating pizza”).

A clear benefit to our data is that the tweets represent real-time, apparently spontaneous thoughts by the users, who are reacting to a popular media event that sexualizes and objectifies women. The fashion show is an hour long, which makes viewing it more potent than watching a brief slide show in a laboratory study; in addition, watching it in a group subjects vulnerable women to comments from their peers. However, reading the body positive and downward social comparisons in some tweets could be beneficial.

In conclusion, the tweets in our sample support social comparison theory and bolster the results of laboratory studies. Given the data that show that heavy consumers of idealized images are at-risk for body dissatisfaction and eating disorders, the most vulnerable women might do best to avoid media that could lead to heavier upward social comparisons. However, given the success that some media literacy interventions (e.g., Halliwell, Eason, & Harcourt, 2011) have had in improving women’s body image, we encourage women (and men) to use twitter and other social media to share positive messages that urge women to focus on their individual strengths and reject a beauty ideal that few could ever meet. Such messages might be particularly effective if shared around the time of body-focused media events, such as the Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show.

References


