

Example of debriefing letter

Dear participant,

You have just participated in a study of the graphic design of amateur photographs. This explanation was part of a cover story that we told you. We were not able to provide you with information related to the actual objective of the study in advance, given that this may have seriously affected the way you responded. The real objective of this study was to research the implicit induced social comparison of body dissatisfaction. Body dissatisfaction is one of the main risk factors in the occurrence of eating disorders. Various studies reveal that there is a link between the extent to which women tend to compare themselves with other women that look better than them (upward social comparison) and the occurrence of body dissatisfaction. Moreover the degree of social comparison is linked to the occurrence of symptoms of eating disorders.

Eighty healthy first-year female students took part in this study. Social comparison was implicitly induced in half this group by means of manipulation. This manipulation involved the 'self' being activated using a written task, which should result in increased social comparison. No social comparison was induced in the other half of the group. These participants were assigned the same written task but without the 'self' being activated. Subsequently all the participants were exposed to photos of professional models. However, we said that they were of students at UM. We did this because a previous study demonstrated that women are more likely to compare themselves and do so more quickly with relevant comparative others than to professional models.

After each photo you also had to make a meaningful sentence out of a scrambled sentence. In the self-activation group these sentences were always in the first person form (to maintain the self-activation) and in the control group the sentences were consistently in the third person form.

The degree of body dissatisfaction was measured before and after exposure to the photos. It is expected that participants that must implicitly compare themselves with attractive comparative others will display a higher degree of body dissatisfaction, compared with participants that did not implicitly compare themselves with comparative others. If after the study you still have questions or believe you are experiencing negative effects, you can always contact the study leader (tel.: XXXXXX or email : XXXXXX). Thank you again for participating.

Yours sincerely,

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

[1] Developed by researchers from the Psychology Faculty of Maastricht University. It concerns research in which students act as participants. Debriefing must be simpler for research involving other groups (such as the general public, children or the elderly) and the language used must be formal.