Positive comments, negative outcomes? The potential downsides of appearance-related commentary in ethnically diverse women

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A B S T R A C T

Although research has shown that appearance-related commentary influences body dissatisfaction and disordered eating, limited research has studied such commentary among ethnically diverse women. The current study examined ethnic group differences in the frequency and impact of appearance-related commentary and associations with body dissatisfaction and eating disorder psychopathology. Participants included 280 undergraduate women aged 18–25 (56.1% European American, 28.6% African American, and 15.3% Latina American). Results indicated no ethnic group differences in frequencies of positive weight/shape, positive general appearance, or negative weight/shape commentary while controlling for BMI. However, African American and Latina American women reported stronger negative responses to positive weight/shape commentary than European American women. Negative responses to positive weight/shape commentary were correlated with more body dissatisfaction in African American women, after controlling for frequency of commentary. Findings suggest that positive weight/shape commentary may be associated with poor outcomes in a subgroup of ethnic minority college women.

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Introduction

Appearance-related commentary has been associated with body dissatisfaction (Wertheim, Paxton, & Blaney, 2004), a risk factor for eating disorders (Stice, 2002). Two types of appearance commentary that have received research attention are negative appearance commentary and positive appearance commentary. Negative appearance commentary refers to comments considered to be negative (e.g., criticisms about shape/weight) while positive appearance commentary refers to comments considered to be positive (e.g., compliments about weight/shape) based on the content. Despite recent research suggesting that positive appearance commentary is more prevalent than negative appearance commentary (Bailey & Ricciardelli, 2010; Gilen & Lefkowitz, 2009), the majority of studies in this area have focused on negative appearance commentary. The effects of weight-related teasing, in particular, are well documented, with studies linking such teasing frequency to poor body image, unhealthy weight control behaviors, binge eating, low self-esteem, and suicidal ideation (Menzel et al., 2010; Neumark-Sztainer & Haines, 2004). This negative feedback has been reported by college women, a subgroup of adults with high rates of eating disorder psychopathology (Schwitzer & Chaote, 2015).

Furthermore, certain ethnic groups, specifically European American and Latina American women, seem to be at greatest risk for poor body image and eating disorder psychopathology during early adulthood (Quick & Byrd-Bredbenner, 2014). In contrast, African American college women have reported larger body shape ideals (Gordon, Castro, Sitnikov, & Holm-Denoma, 2010) and less body dissatisfaction and eating disorder psychopathology compared to other ethnic groups (Quick & Byrd-Bredbenner, 2014). Sociocultural influences, such as media messages regarding societal standards of physical attractiveness and pressure to attain these standards, have been shown to account for some of the ethnic group differences in eating disorder psychopathology (Quick & Byrd-Bredbenner, 2014); however, more research is needed to identify other factors that contribute to such ethnic group differences in at-risk college women.

Positive Appearance Commentary

Although there is strong research supporting the links among weight-related teasing, body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviors (Menzel et al., 2010), limited research has examined the positive forms of appearance-related commentary in college women, especially with regard to the impact of such commentary. It
is important to not only measure the frequency but also the impact of positive feedback, given that this feedback may promote societal standards regarding appearance for women and lead to greater thin ideal internalization in some women. Thin ideal internalization is defined as accepting societal ideals of physical attractiveness and aspiring to attain such ideals (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999), and is considered to be one of the strongest predictors of eating disorders (Culbert, Racine, & Klump, 2015).

Positive appearance commentary may also have a negative impact through its relationship with self-objectification. According to objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), society treats women as bodies that exist for the pleasure of others, and in turn women often adopt an observer’s perspective of their physical selves and view themselves as objects to be evaluated on the basis of their appearance. This internalization of an observer’s perspective is referred to as self-objectification. The primary behavioral manifestation of self-objectification is body surveillance which is frequent monitoring of one's external appearance that contributes to the various negative outcomes associated with self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Self-objectification has been shown to predict appearance anxiety, body surveillance, body shame, and disordered eating (Calogero, Davis, & Thompson, 2004; Slater & Tiggemann, 2013; Tiggemann & Slater, 2001). In line with objectification theory, positive weight/shape commentary may be perceived as objectifying evaluations which in turn, promote self-objectification. This could trigger appearance anxiety and body surveillance and create pressure to sustain such positive attention, resulting in more appearance management.

Prior research supports this link between positive appearance commentary and self-objectification. Slater and Tiggemann (2015) found that higher frequencies of positive appearance comments were related to higher levels of both self-objectification and body surveillance while higher frequencies of negative appearance comments were related to higher levels of body surveillance in female adolescents. With regard to the impact of positive appearance comments, Calogero, Herbozo, and Thompson (2009) found that increased body surveillance partially mediated the relationship between the impact of appearance compliments focused on weight/shape and body dissatisfaction with trait self-objectification moderating this effect in college women. It was also reported that more positive responses to appearance compliments were associated with higher body surveillance, trait self-objectification, and body dissatisfaction. Women with high self-objectification may respond favorably to positive weight/shape commentary because they support objectifying body evaluations and value positive evaluations, despite associated negative outcomes. This phenomenon regarding potential harmful effects of weight/shape compliments has been termed "complimentary weightism," which is the notion that such compliments, even if experienced as positive by the target, contribute to poor outcomes, such as greater body dissatisfaction, in some women (Calogero et al., 2009).

Other research has also indicated detrimental effects of positive appearance comments on a subgroup of women. The frequency of positive comments from parents regarding weight, shape, and eating patterns from parents has shown a positive relationship with drive for thinness in college women (Roders, Paxton, & Chabrol, 2009). Further, higher frequencies of positive weight/shape commentary, but not positive general appearance commentary, have been associated with increased levels of physical activity among college women (Cline & Gammage, 2016), which may suggest maintaining or enhancing one's body shape is a motivation for exercise. In addition, Herbozo and Thompson (2006a) found that more negative responses to positive weight/shape comments and positive general appearance comments were associated with higher body dissatisfaction and lower overall appearance satisfaction and self-esteem. Therefore, it is important to consider the manner in which positive appearance comments are experienced (i.e., positively or negatively) rather than only the content of the commentary.

Conversely, there are studies showing that positive appearance comments may be beneficial for some women (Bailey & Ricciardelli, 2010; Carriere & Cluck, 2014; Fea & Brannon, 2006; McLaren, Kuh, Hardy, & Gauvin, 2004). A higher frequency of positive appearance commentary has been associated with lower body dissatisfaction in young adult women (Bailey & Ricciardelli, 2010) and greater body satisfaction in middle aged-women (McLaren et al., 2004). Fea and Brannon (2006) reported that college women with high levels of self-objectification showed less negative mood after receiving appearance compliments compared to neutral compliments. Further, Carriere and Kluck (2014) found that a higher frequency of positive weight/shape commentary and positive general appearance commentary from a romantic partner correlated with greater relationship satisfaction among college women. The mixed findings regarding the outcomes linked to positive appearance commentary may be due to the greater focus on the frequency and content of such comments, but not their impact. It is also possible that the contrasting results are related to the temporal nature of the scales used in this area of research which range from immediate positive feedback to positive feedback received within a two year period. Positive appearance commentary may be associated with increased body satisfaction shortly after it is received; however, over a longer period, such positive feedback may be associated with increased body image concerns.

**Appearance-related Commentary and Ethnicity**

As with the limited and mixed research on positive appearance commentary, there is also conflicting research on appearance-related commentary among different ethnic groups, and this research has mostly focused on the frequency of negative weight-related commentary. For instance, in a study of young adults, approximately 50% of Native American, 43.5% of Latina American, 41.8% of Asian American, and 38.5% of African American women reported experiencing hurtful weight-related comments from family members, compared to 28.6% of European American women (Eisenberg, Berge, Fulkerson, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2011). Similar ethnic differences were found for negative comments from significant others. Additionally, Calogero et al. (2009) found that ethnic minority college women experienced higher frequencies of appearance criticisms focused on weight/shape from interpersonal sources compared to European American college women. Latin American and Asian American adolescent females have also reported more weight-related teasing from family members than European American adolescent females (van den Berg, Neumark-Sztainer, Eisenberg, & Haines, 2008).

Other research has shown that ethnic minorities may experience rates of weight-related teasing comparable to or lower than European Americans. Akan and Grilo (1995) found that European American and African American women reported higher frequencies of weight-related teasing during childhood/adolescence compared to Asian American women. European American adolescent females have also reported more weight-related teasing from peers than Asian American adolescent females, and were more bothered by such teasing than African American and Asian American adolescent females (van den Berg et al., 2008). The contrasting findings may be related to prior studies assessing different types of negative appearance commentary and time periods during which such feedback occurred. Additional research on the frequency and impact of negative appearance commentary among young adult women of different ethnic groups is needed.

In addition, little is known about the frequency and impact of positive appearance commentary among different ethnic groups.
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