

Self-schema and social comparison explanations of body dissatisfaction: A laboratory investigation

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Abstract

The current study was an investigation of the self-schema and social comparison theories of body dissatisfaction. The social comparison manipulation consisted of exposure to one of three levels of comparison figure: upward, downward, or no comparison. Two different imagery exercises served to prime either a participants' appearance self-schema, or a non-appearance schema. Participants completed state measures of body image and mood at pre- and posttest. Results indicated no significant interaction between priming and social comparison and no significant main effect for priming. However, there was a significant effect of social comparison, such that those in the downward comparison condition showed an increase in body satisfaction and positive mood. Results are discussed in the context of self-schema theory and social comparison, and suggestions are given for future research that might further shed light on these theoretical approaches for understanding body dissatisfaction.

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Introduction

Two prominent cognitive models that have been applied to the study of body image and disordered eating behaviors are self-schema theory and appearance social comparison (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). Self-schemas are “cognitive generalizations about the self, derived from past experience that organize and guide the processing of self-related information” (Markus, 1977, p. 64). Individuals for whom appearance is very important are purported to develop more complex, interconnected networks of knowledge and affect regarding appearance, and to demonstrate a variety of information-

processing biases related to their self-schema (Markus, Hamill, & Sentis, 1987). Researchers have in fact demonstrated biases in attention, memory, and judgment or selective interpretation related to appearance and body image, which has been taken as evidence for the existence of appearance schemas (Williamson, 1996; Williamson, Muller, Reas, & Thaw, 1999). Because the elaborateness of a schema, or schematicity, cannot be manipulated as an independent variable, researchers investigating self-schemas have borrowed a priming paradigm from cognitive psychology in which a presumed pre-existing self-schema is primed or activated by the presentation of schema-relevant stimuli (Altabe & Thompson, 1996). Stimuli or procedures that have been used in prior studies include word stem completion tasks (Altabe & Thompson, 1996), pictures of specific body parts (Altabe & Thompson, 1996), answering questions regarding appearance and being weighed by a researcher (Labarge, Cash, & Brown,

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1998), watching television commercials with depictions of women with ideal appearances (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2002, 2003), and viewing advertisements for beauty products (Birkeland et al., 2005). The results of these studies have been mixed. Some researchers have found significant effects on body satisfaction, appearance satisfaction, depression, anger, self-confidence, and interference on a modified Stroop task (Altabe & Thompson, 1996, Study 2; Labarge et al., 1998; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2002, 2003), while others reported no effect of the priming (Altabe & Thompson, 1996, Study 1; Birkeland et al., 2005).

An alternative cognitive explanation of body dissatisfaction is social comparison theory. Social comparison theory was originally proposed by Festinger (1954) and posits that in order to form assessments of themselves individuals compare themselves to others in their social environment on traits or characteristics that are important to them. Studies of appearance comparison have generally found support for the important role of appearance social comparison in body dissatisfaction. Dispositional tendency to compare one's appearance to that of others was found to be a potent predictor of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (Stormer & Thompson, 1996; Thompson, Coovert, & Stormer, 1999). Experimental studies have manipulated the direction of comparison, for instance by exposing participants to an overweight or slender person supposedly in order to provoke a downward or upward comparison (Lin & Kulik, 2002). In this vein, a recent meta-analysis of studies of exposure to idealized images of female bodies concluded that viewing these images leads to a consistent, but small, effect on body dissatisfaction (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). Researchers are now investigating the cognitive processes that occur upon exposure to an idealized comparison target, as well as the moderators or mediators of this process (Tiggemann & McGill, 2004). Overall, comparison studies indicate that appearance comparison, to peers and especially to media images, has an effect on body image outcomes.

Studies combining self-schema and social comparison

A few studies have examined both appearance comparison and schemas in relation to body dissatisfaction. For instance, Tiggemann (2001) examined the interaction of person and situational determinants of body dissatisfaction in Australian undergraduate women. Participants were instructed to imagine themselves in four different situations which varied

on level of body focus and social interaction: walking by attractive people while at the beach in a bathing suit (body focus and social), in a dressing room trying on bathing suits (body focus only), eating with a friend at a cafeteria (social only), and at home getting ready for school (neither body focus nor social). The social situations were hypothesized to induce comparison processing, whereas the body focus conditions were hypothesized to evoke more general appearance-related processing that did not necessarily involve comparison. The results showed the expected effect on body dissatisfaction of the body focus situations, as well as a significant 3-way interaction between BMI, social comparison tendency, and condition such that women with high BMI who tended to engage in social comparisons had lower body esteem in the social conditions.

Tiggemann and McGill (2004) investigated the effects of viewing images from fashion magazine ads on mood and body dissatisfaction, while also examining internalization of sociocultural ideals, dispositional level of appearance comparison, and appearance schematicity as moderators or mediators. Further, they also included appearance comparison as a process variable or dependent variable hypothesized to be caused by the experimental manipulations, and they manipulated instructional set to induce social comparison, general appearance processing, or distraction from the appearance aspects of the stimuli. They exposed participants to one of three types of images: full body shots of highly attractive models, shots of body parts that met the sociocultural ideal, or shots of various products. As can be expected from a study with so many variables, their results were complex. Overall, however, they found that exposure to the condition with only products led to less body dissatisfaction and negative mood than did exposure to either type of idealized body image. They also found that appearance comparison (as an outcome variable) was increased in the full body and body part conditions compared to the product condition, and that comparison decreased across the instructional set conditions.

Tiggemann and Slater (2004) conducted a study in which they exposed female college students to 15 min music video clips with either highly attractive women and a focus on appearance, or with "ordinary-looking" women and non-appearance-related images such as landscape shots. They found that the appearance video condition resulted in higher appearance schema activation and body dissatisfaction. They also found increased comparison processing in the idealized appearance condition. Further, they tested social comparison and

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