

Body dissatisfaction and body comparison with media images in males and females

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Abstract

This study examined the role of media body comparison as a mediator of the relationships between psychological factors and sociocultural pressures to be thin and body dissatisfaction in both females and males. Participants were 1,386 females (mean age = 19.37 years) and 1,130 males (mean age = 19.46) from diverse backgrounds who completed a self-report questionnaire. Path analysis was used to test a cross-sectional model in which media body comparison mediated the impact of self-esteem, depressive mood, parent dieting environment, friend dieting, TV exposure, magazine message exposure, weight teasing and body mass index (BMI) on body dissatisfaction. In females, media body comparison partially or fully mediated relationships between self-esteem, depressive mood, friend dieting, magazine message exposure and BMI, and body dissatisfaction. In males, media body comparison was not a significant predictor of body dissatisfaction. This research particularly highlights the need to further examine processes that are involved in the development of body dissatisfaction in males.

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Introduction

A substantial research literature now attests to the negative distress caused by body dissatisfaction in both females and males, as well as its association with low self-esteem and depressive symptoms (Keery, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004; Paxton, Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, & Eisenberg, 2006; Wichstrom, 1999), and the development of unhealthy dieting behaviours and

disordered eating (e.g., Neumark-Sztainer, Paxton, Hannan, Haines, & Story, 2006; Stice, 2002). Research indicates that individual attributes, such as low self-esteem and depressive mood as well as higher body mass index (BMI) are risk factors for increases in body dissatisfaction (e.g., Field et al., 2001; Paxton, Eisenberg, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2006; Presnell, Bearman, & Stice, 2004). In addition, sociocultural pressures, such as exposure to idealized media figures, family and peer dieting, pressures to be thin, and weight teasing have been shown to be risk factors for increases in body dissatisfaction (e.g., Field et al., 2001; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Paxton, Eisenberg et al., 2006; Stice & Whitenton, 2002). Recently, attention has turned to examination of cognitive processes that may contribute to the development of body dissatisfaction.

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More specifically, researchers have investigated cognitive processes that may mediate the relationships between individual and sociocultural factors and the development of body dissatisfaction (Cash, 2002; Williamson, Stewart, White, & York-Crowe, 2002). The present research explores this issue by examining media body comparison as a potential mediator of individual and sociocultural factors and body dissatisfaction in both females and males.

The concept of body comparison is based on Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory in which a social comparison "represents the evaluative process that involves both seeking information and making judgments about the self relative to others" (Jones, 2004, p. 823). Body comparison is the process of comparing one's body with that of another, and research suggests there is individual variation on this attribute (Schutz, Paxton, & Wertheim, 2002). Frequency of body comparison in girls has been associated with negative self-evaluation outcomes, and body comparison tendency is consistently correlated with body dissatisfaction (e.g., Jones, 2004; Keery et al., 2004; Schutz et al., 2002). In adolescent girls and young adult women and men, the most frequent and important targets for body and appearance comparison are peers and media images (Schutz et al., 2002; Heinberg & Thompson, 1992). In this research, we examined body comparison with media images, which we label as media body comparison.

There are a number of reasons to propose that body comparison, especially with media images, may mediate sociocultural variables and body dissatisfaction. First, Festinger (1954) proposed that individuals are more likely to make comparisons in areas that are self-relevant and later research supports this contention (Major, Testa, & Bylsma, 1991). Having a higher BMI and being exposed to environments that emphasize the importance of thinness are likely to increase the self-relevance of thinness; therefore these factors are likely to be associated with an increase in body comparison, which could then lead to body dissatisfaction.

In the only longitudinal examination of the role of body comparison in girls of which we are aware, Jones (2004) found that change in comparison tendency mediated the influence of appearance conversations with friends measured at Time 1 and change in body dissatisfaction from Time 1 to 2. Experimental studies of girls (Durkin & Paxton, 2002) and college women (Tiggemann & McGill, 2004) have also shown that increased body comparison is a mediator of the effect of viewing idealized same sex-media images on body image.

Theoretical models have been proposed to elucidate variables that mediate psychological attributes, BMI and sociocultural pressures to be thin and body dissatisfaction. One such model, the Tripartite Influence Model (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999), proposes that relationships between media, family and peer environments and body dissatisfaction are mediated by body comparison tendency. Several modeling studies have tested the Tripartite Model and have found support for body comparison as a mediator between sociocultural pressures to be thin and body dissatisfaction in female samples. For example, van den Berg, Thompson, Obremski-Brandon, and Coovert (2002) found that body comparison mediated the influence of media pressures and family pressures on body dissatisfaction in college women. BMI and global psychological functioning were directly associated with body dissatisfaction but peer influences were not related to body dissatisfaction. In a test of the Tripartite Model in a sample of adolescent girls, Keery et al. (2004) found that body comparison mediated the influence of sociocultural factors (including peers, parents, media, and teasing) on body dissatisfaction. However, these studies were cross-sectional and replication with longitudinal studies is required before drawing firm conclusions about the mediating role of social comparison.

Schutz et al. (2002) suggested a more general model in which body comparison mediates the impact of a wider range of variables, including psychological and attitudinal as well as sociocultural variables, on body dissatisfaction in girls. Research from a number of sources supports this model. Festinger (1954) proposed that individuals who are uncertain of themselves will be more likely to engage in comparison. This theory is supported by research that has found that individuals who are depressed or have low self-esteem are more likely to make comparisons (e.g., Campbell, 1990; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999; Weary, Elbin, & Hill, 1987; Wood, Giordano-Beech, Taylor, Michela, & Gaus, 1994). Further, in an experimental study of adolescent girls, Durkin, Paxton, and Sorbello (2007) reported that frequency of body comparison mediated the effect of psychological status (a variable made up of self-esteem, depressive mood and self-concept clarity) on increase in body dissatisfaction after viewing idealized female media images. Taken overall, research with females suggests that the relationships of depressive mood and low self-esteem, BMI, and sociocultural pressures to be thin with body dissatisfaction may be at least partially mediated by frequency of body comparison.

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