

## Effects of parental comments on body dissatisfaction and eating disturbance in young adults: A sociocultural model

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### ABSTRACT

This study examined a sociocultural model of the influence of parental comments on body shape and eating concerns among males and females. Questionnaires were completed by 338 undergraduates. Participants reported levels of perceived parental comments, internalization of media ideals, appearance comparison, body dissatisfaction, drive for thinness and bulimia. Results revealed that, regardless of gender, internalization and appearance comparison only partially mediated the relationship between parental comments and the outcome variables. The final model for females explained a larger proportion of the variability in body shape and eating concerns than in males, with positive and negative parental comments directly related to body dissatisfaction and through it to eating outcomes. In males, only negative comments were directly related to body dissatisfaction. These findings highlight the role of parental influences in sociocultural models of the development of body dissatisfaction and eating concerns, and the gender-specific patterns of sociocultural influence.

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### Introduction

Perceived pressure from parents has been described as one of the principal sociocultural factors related to the development of body dissatisfaction and eating concerns among young adults, perhaps even the most salient (Ata, Ludden, & Lally, 2007; Dunkley, Wertheim, & Paxton, 2001; Field, Camargo, Barr, Berkey, Roberts, & Colditz, 2001; van den Berg, Thompson, Obremski-Brandon, & Covert, 2002; van den Berg, Wertheim, Thompson, & Paxton, 2002). Parental comments regarding shape, weight and eating have been shown to be an important form of these pressures (Benedikt, Wertheim, & Love, 1998; Vincent & McCabe, 2000; Wertheim, Martin, Prior, Sanson, & Smart, 2002). Furthermore, the influence of parental pressures on body shape and eating concerns has been shown to be mediated by levels of media internalization and appearance comparison (Keery, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004). The aim of the present study was to propose a model of the influence of parental comments regarding weight and shape on body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviors among young adults.

Parental influences, and in particular direct comments regarding appearance, have been shown to be linked with body dissatisfaction and disordered eating in both males and females (Baker, Whisman, & Brownell, 2000). Negative comments from

parents about body shape have been found to predict body dissatisfaction (Benedikt et al., 1998; Hanna & Bond, 2006; Vincent & McCabe, 2000). Criticism of body shape has been associated with disordered eating among male and female university students, and adolescents (Baker et al., 2000; Gross & Nelson, 2000; Hanna & Bond, 2006; Keel, Heatherton, Harnden, & Hornig, 1997). Parental teasing has also been shown to be associated with body dissatisfaction and disordered eating, as has encouragement to diet (Keery, Boutelle, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2005; Fulkerson, McGuire, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, French, & Perry, 2002; Schwartz, Phares, Tantleff-Dunn, & Thompson, 1999; Wertheim, Mee, & Paxton, 1999). The effect of positive messages regarding body shape and healthy eating messages has been explored to a limited extent. Higher perception of positive messages regarding body shape and eating has been associated with higher body satisfaction among female undergraduate students (Gross & Nelson, 2000). Among adolescent boys, positive messages have also been proposed to be associated with body satisfaction (Ricciardelli, McCabe, & Banfield, 2000).

Parental influences have been reported to be mediated by a number of variables (Rodgers & Chabrol, 2009). In particular, much attention has been paid to the role of individual tendencies to engage in social comparison, as well as the internalization of media ideals. Both of these constructs have been shown to be strongly linked with sociocultural pressures and body dissatisfaction (Cafri, Yamamiya, Brannick, & Thompson, 2005; Durkin, Paxton, & Sorbello, 2007). The mediational role of appearance comparison was described by Schutz, Paxton, and Wertheim (2002) and also

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van den Berg, Thompson, et al. (2002) and van den Berg, Wertheim, et al. (2002) with the tripartite model. Among a sample of female university students, the relationship between parental influences (including feedback on physical appearance, teasing, perceived pressure, and inferred attitudes) and body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (both restriction and bulimic) was fully mediated by appearance comparison (van den Berg, Thompson, et al., 2002; van den Berg, Wertheim, et al., 2002). An extension of this model (Keery et al., 2004) provided further evidence to suggest that parental influences were fully mediated by appearance comparison and internalization. A replication of this study among adolescent girls, however, did not support the full-mediation hypothesis, but proposed an additional direct influence on restrictive behaviours (Shroff & Thompson, 2006). Recent research has provided further support for the role of awareness and internalization of media ideals as mediators of the relationship between parental messages and disordered eating among college women (Cordero & Israel, 2009).

The research reviewed above has largely focused on female adolescents and young adults, as body image and eating concerns are often considered to be gender-linked concerns. However, there is evidence to suggest that these issues are increasingly relevant to male adolescents and young adults (Halliwell & Harvey, 2006; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003). Gender differences in body image and eating outcomes have been consistently described, with girls tending to report perceiving more pressure from their parents, engage in more appearance comparison with their peers, report higher levels of internalization, and body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (Ata et al., 2007; Field et al., 2008; Jones, 2001; Knauss, Paxton, & Alsaker, 2007; Peterson, Paulson, & Williams, 2007; Smolak, Levine, & Thompson, 2001; Steinberg, Phares, & Thompson, 2004). In addition, some gender differences have been reported regarding the relationships between sociocultural pressures, internalization, appearance comparison and body shape and eating outcomes. In particular, internalization has been suggested to be more closely linked to body dissatisfaction in girls (Knauss et al., 2007; Knauss, Paxton, & Alsaker, 2008). Furthermore, appearance comparison was shown to longitudinally predict body dissatisfaction in girls alone (Jones, 2004). Other authors describe similar models accounting for the influence of sociocultural pressures on body shape and eating concerns among boys and girls (Halliwell & Harvey, 2006).

The aim of the present study was to evaluate a model (Fig. 1) accounting for the influence of parental comments on body shape and eating concerns among a sample of male and female young adults. The hypothesized model emerges from the mechanisms proposed for parental influences in the Tripartite model, and extends them to both genders. In order to explore the relationships more fully, both positive and negative parental comments were considered, as well as those referring to the shape and weight of

other people. In line with the theoretical framework, both appearance comparison and internalization were expected to mediate the influence of parental comments on body dissatisfaction and disordered eating, and a pathway was hypothesized leading from negative comments to drive for thinness.

## Method

### Participants and procedure

Participants were 338 Australian students from the Melbourne area, of which 147 (43%) were male and 188 (57%) were female. Their ages ranged from 18 to 21 years old ( $M = 19.58$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ). The ethnic composition of the sample was 82% Caucasian, 8% Asian, 3% Hispanic, 3% Middle-Eastern, 2% Indian, and 2% of other ethnicity. Seventy-two percent of the participants were still living at home, and 84% of those lived with both parents.

Participants were approached on campus by one of the authors (RR) and briefly introduced to the study, which was approved by the Psychology Faculty Human Ethics Committee of La Trobe University, Melbourne. Students who agreed to participate were handed a packet containing an information sheet, the questionnaire, and a pre-paid return envelope. Of the 1100 questionnaires handed out, 376 were returned (response rate of 34%). Of these, a further 38 were excluded because participants indicated they came from single-parent families or returned an incomplete questionnaire.

### Materials

**Parental comments.** Comments from parents were assessed using the Parental Comments Scale (Rodgers, Faure, & Chabrol, 2009). This scale invited participants to rate, on a five-point scale, from “1 = never” to “5 = always”, the frequency with which they recall each of their parents having made a number of statements. Each item was presented twice, once with the word “mother”, once with the word “father”. The seven items of the Negative Comments subscale explored negative statements regarding the participant’s weight and shape, eating habits and fitness; for example “If you want to look good you need to work out more”. The Cronbach’s alpha value for the internal reliability for this subscale in this sample was .91 among females and .87 among males. The Positive Comments subscale contained five items that assessed positive messages regarding the participant’s weight, shape and eating habits; for example “You don’t need to lose weight”. In this sample, this subscale had a Cronbach’s alpha value of .85 among females and .84 among males. The Importance & Comparison Comments subscale contained five items assessing comments that referred to the shape and weight of other people; for example “My mother commented on the shape or weight of my friends”. The Cronbach’s

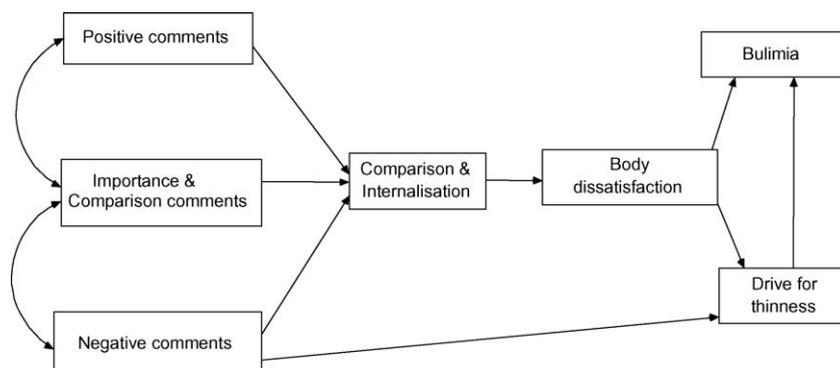


Fig. 1. Hypothesized model.

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