



Social comparisons, appearance related comments, contingent self-esteem and their relationships with body dissatisfaction and eating disturbance among women

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ABSTRACT

This study examined social comparisons, appearance related comments and contingent self-esteem, and their relationships with body dissatisfaction and eating disturbance in young adult women. Importantly, the role of both positive and negative appearance related comments, and upward and downward comparisons, were investigated. A self-report questionnaire assessing each of these variables was completed by one hundred and ninety-six women aged 18–35. A higher frequency of negative comments and contingent self-esteem were associated with higher upward comparisons, and more positive comments were associated with higher downward comparisons. Overall, social comparisons were shown to be more important than verbal commentary and contingent self-esteem. More upward comparisons and less downward comparisons uniquely predicted higher body dissatisfaction and eating disturbance. In addition, negative appearance comments were found to be more salient than positive comments. Negative comments and contingent self-esteem uniquely predicted more eating disturbance but positive comments were not a predictor of body dissatisfaction or eating disturbance. Longitudinal studies are now required to establish the direction of these relationships and to more fully examine the interplay among the factors. In addition, given that our study only assessed self-reported social comparisons, our findings need to be validated against experimental methods.

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1. Introduction

Increasingly women are displaying alarming levels of body dissatisfaction and symptoms of disordered eating (Monro & Huon, 2005; Wardle, Waller, & Rappoport, 2001). Extreme dieting (i.e., purging and laxative use for weight loss) and binge eating are forms of eating disturbance, which have become highly prevalent among females (Hudson, Hiripi, Pope, & Kessler, 2007; Vartanian, Giant, & Passino, 2001). Body dissatisfaction is also associated with obesity and depression (Darby, Hay, Mond, Rodgers, & Owen, 2007; Wiederman & Pryor, 2000), social anxiety (Cash & Fleming, 2002) and eating disorders (Stice, 2002), as well as potentially harmful weight loss strategies, which include extreme dieting, self-induced vomiting, laxative misuse, use of diet pills, and excessive exercise (Darby et al., 2007).

One major factor that has been shown to be influential in the development and/or maintenance of body dissatisfaction and eating disturbance is social comparison (Stormer & Thompson, 1996). Several studies have shown that individuals who frequently compare their own bodily appearance to 'more attractive' others such as models in the media, (i.e., an upward comparison), are at a greater risk of body dissatisfaction and eating disturbance (e.g., Corning, Krumm, & Smitham, 2006; Dittmar & Howard, 2004; Tiggemann, Polivy, & Hargreaves, 2009).

Less research has examined the effects of comparisons made with others who are perceived as 'less attractive' (i.e., a downward comparison). However, three studies, which have examined the effects of downward appearance related comparisons, all showed that downward comparisons were associated with higher levels of body satisfaction among pre-adolescent and adolescent girls (Martin & Gentry, 1997), and female university students (Lew, Mann, Myers, Taylor, & Bower, 2007; van den Berg & Thompson, 2007).

While it is clear that social comparisons are influential in the development of body dissatisfaction and eating disturbance, verbal commentary in the form of feedback or messages made about an individual's physical appearance is another important sociocultural influence. Research on verbal commentary has predominantly focused on the negative forms of verbal feedback, particularly of the form characterized by weight or appearance related teasing and criticism. Findings continually show that individuals who frequently perceive such negative comments from others such as their peers, family or romantic partners, consistently present with body dissatisfaction and eating disorder symptomatology (Ata, Ludden, & Lally, 2007; Keery, Boutelle, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2005; McLaren, Kuh, Hardy, & Gauvin, 2004; Shomaker & Furman, 2009). In contrast, there has been a paucity of research on the role of perceived positive appearance based comments such as compliments and encouragement (McLaren et al., 2004). Only two studies were found, which have investigated the relationship between positive verbal commentary and body image among females, and these have yielded conflicting

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results (Herbozo & Thompson, 2006a; McLaren et al., 2004). McLaren and colleagues (2004) found that among adult women, positive comments about weight and shape were interpreted positively and were associated with increased body satisfaction. In contrast, Herbozo and Thompson (2006a) found that positive comments also predicted body dissatisfaction among young adult women. They specifically found that the women who were more likely to be negatively affected by positive comments were those with greater appearance dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem.

Considering that much research in the domain of body image has focused on social comparisons and verbal commentary, it is surprising that only two studies were located, which have studied the two socio-cultural influences together (Stormer & Thompson, 1996; Thompson & Heinberg, 1993). Consistent with previous work, both Thompson and Heinberg (1993) and Stormer and Thompson (1996), found that among young adult females, social comparison tendencies and a history of being teased regarding physical appearance were significant predictors of body dissatisfaction and eating disturbance. However, both studies examined verbal commentary with a focus only on teasing, and failed to address the influence of positive comments. Additionally, the scales used to assess appearance related comparisons, did not clearly differentiate between upward and downward comparisons. Instead, they focused on the individual's tendency to compare their own body with that of others of the same sex.

Additionally, further research is required to examine the potential moderators in the relationship between verbal commentary and social comparisons, and body dissatisfaction and eating disturbance. Patrick, Neighbors and Knee (2004), and Park and Crocker (2008) have indicated that contingent self-esteem (CSE), being a type of self-worth, which is based on matching a particular standard or meeting some objective, may actually be an important moderator in this relationship. In contrast to "true self-esteem", which "reflects feelings of self-worth that are secure and not dependent on attaining certain outcomes", "contingent self-esteem" is conditional on "externally imposed or internally based demands" such as "good grades, social standing, physical appearance, or other evaluative standard" (Patrick et al., 2004, p. 502). In other words, "true self-esteem" is viewed as resulting from one's acceptance of oneself without requiring any validation while "contingent self-esteem" is conditional on one's successes or meeting other externally or internally imposed criteria. Therefore, individuals who possess high contingent self-esteem "are highly preoccupied with their achievements and how they measure up in other people's eyes" (Kernis, 2003, p. 8).

As it is only a relatively new construct, CSE has not yet received much focus in the field of body image. However, recent research has highlighted that CSE is an important factor to consider in order to more fully understand the relationship between sociocultural influences and body image concerns. Many women place a high degree of importance on their body image and physical attractiveness, and this becomes a measure of their self-worth (Patrick et al., 2004). Individuals with high CSE, whose self-worth is largely based upon particular external standards such as physical appearance, are more likely to seek evaluation and validation from others in this area (Crocker, 2002). They may seek this validation in the form of verbal feedback, or they may conduct their own self-evaluations via social comparisons (Patrick et al., 2004). Therefore, negative verbal comments and upward social comparisons may have greater negative implications for individuals with high level of CSE.

In order to further explore the above relationships, the present cross-sectional study examined the nature of the association between both verbal commentary and social comparisons, and body dissatisfaction and eating disturbance, in young adult females. Both perceived positive and negative comments made about an individual's bodily appearance, and perceived upward and downward body related comparisons, were investigated. From the research reviewed, it was hypothesized that there would be a relationship between verbal commentary and social

comparisons. It was expected that women who perceive a greater frequency of negative comments would also engage in more upward comparisons, and women who report a greater frequency of positive comments would also engage more frequently in downward comparisons. It was also hypothesized that the perceived frequency of higher upward and lower downward body related comparisons would predict higher body dissatisfaction and eating disturbance. It was further expected that the perceived frequency of more negative comments and fewer positive comments would be associated with greater body dissatisfaction and eating disturbance. Finally, it was predicted that CSE would moderate the relationships between both verbal commentary and social comparisons, and body dissatisfaction and eating disturbance. Lastly, the role of Body Mass Index (BMI) was included as a covariate. BMI was included because research has shown it to correlate with female body image concerns (Annis, Cash, & Hrabosky, 2004).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants were 196 adult women aged between 18 and 35 years ($M = 22.11$, $SD = 3.24$). Participants were volunteers, and were recruited from Deakin University and using snowballing techniques. The vast majority of participants were students (77%). The BMI of participants ranged from 15.43 to 38.87 ($M = 22.81$, $SD = 3.95$); 9.7% were underweight ($BMI < 18.5$); 70.9% were within the normal weight range ($BMI = 18.5$ to 24.9), and 19.4% were overweight ($BMI > 25$).

2.2. Measures

The Verbal Commentary on Physical Appearance Scale (VCOPAS) (Herbozo & Thompson, 2006a) was used to assess both perceived negative (e.g., "You need to start watching what you eat"; "You've gained weight") and positive body related comments perceived by females (e.g., "Your outfit looks great on you"; "You are in great shape"). Participants were instructed: "Below is a list of comments that may have been made about you. Please read each item and rate how often you think you have been the recipient of such a comment". Both negative verbal comments and positive verbal comments were assessed by 10 items, and these were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 for *never* to 5 for *always*. Higher scores indicated a higher frequency of negative comment or higher frequency of positive comments, respectively. Herbozo and Thompson (2006b) have demonstrated that the scales have high levels of internal consistency, test-retest reliability, and construct validity.

The Social Comparisons on Physical Appearance Scale is a new scale adapted by the researchers and based on the VCOPAS to assess both upward (e.g. "I feel I have gained more weight than my peers"; "My body isn't as attractive as the others around me") and downward social comparisons ("My outfit looks better on me than it would on others"; "I am in better shape than those around me") relating to appearance. Participants were instructed: "Below is a list of comparisons that you may have made with those around you. Please read each item and rate how often you think you have engaged in such a comparison with your peers". Both upward and downward social comparisons were assessed by 10 items and these were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 for *never* to 5 for *always*. Higher scores indicated a higher frequency of upward comparisons or higher frequency of downward comparisons, respectively.

The Contingent Self-Esteem Scale (Paradise & Kernis, 1999) was used to assess self-esteem contingencies with regard to issues such as gaining others' approval and meeting personal standards. A sample item included: "An important measure of my worth is how physically attractive I am". The scale consists of 15 items that were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 for *not at all* to 5 for *very much like me*. Higher scores

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