



# Mirror, mirror on the wall: How women learn body dissatisfaction



Lilac Lev-Ari <sup>a,\*</sup>, Inbar Baumgarten-Katz <sup>a,b</sup>, Ada H. Zohar <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Ruppin Academic Center, Emek Hefer 40250, Israel

<sup>b</sup> Sha'ar Menashe Mental Health Center Hadera, Israel, affiliated to Rappaport Faculty of Medicine, Technion, Israel Institute of Technology

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 19 October 2013

Received in revised form 19 February 2014

Accepted 29 April 2014

Available online 20 May 2014

### Keywords:

Body image

Body dissatisfaction

Figure rating scale

BMI

Social comparisons

Drive for thinness

## ABSTRACT

Extensive research indicates that exposure to media as well as pressure and modeling by sociocultural agents, such as peers and family, are predictive of the development of body image dissatisfaction (BID). This influence is mediated by social comparison and internalization of the thin-ideal. In the current study we assessed comparisons between participants and other women with whom they were in close relationships, (e.g. mother, sister and close female friend), and hypothesized that these would influence women's BID and drive-to-thinness. 283 women between the ages of 18–42 (mean = 25.04; SD = 3.53) sampled through social networking completed an online self-report which included the original Figure Rating Scale, which yielded self-ideal disparity, as well as a modified version comparing self to mother, self to sister closest-in-age, and self to best friend and then were asked to directly compare themselves to these women. In addition they completed the EDI-2's drive-for-thinness and body dissatisfaction subscales, and reported on Body Mass Index (BMI). Results indicate that comparisons to mothers, sisters, and best friend, were all associated with self-ideal disparity. BMI only slightly mediated this effect. Comparison to sister and to best friend, but not to mother, influenced drive-for-thinness and body dissatisfaction. Positive correlations were found between direct and indirect comparisons to others. Comparison to best friend was the most influential on body ideal. We conclude that comparison to others in close proximity greatly influences women's body ideal and may have a formative role in the development of women's body dissatisfaction. While women cannot choose their mother and sister closest in age, they do choose their best friend; and it is interesting that the comparison to the best friend is so influential.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Exposure to media and social comparisons has been found to be associated with body image dissatisfaction (BID), especially in women. Western culture places a growing emphasis on an ultra-thin body ideal, and this is reflected in the media (Anschutz, Engels, & Van Strien, 2008; Borzekowski, Robinson, & Killen, 2000; Calado, Lameiras, Sepulveda, Rodriguez, & Carrera, 2011; Carlson Jones, 2001; Dittmar & Howard, 2004). Research has found associations between exposure to media and BID, even in very young girls (Anschutz & Engels, 2010; Anschutz, Engels, & Van Strien, 2012; Anschutz, Spruijt-Metz, Van Strien, & Engels, 2011; Blowers, Loxton, Grady-Flessner, Occhipinti, & Dawe, 2003; Calado et al., 2011). Anschutz and Engels (2010), for example, found that girls as young as 11–12 years old compared their body image unfavorably to those viewed on TV.

However, in an extensive review of the influence of the media on body dissatisfaction, Ferguson, Winegard, and Winegard (2011) concluded that media exposure in itself is not a main contributor to the internalization of the thin ideal. They argue that meta-analyses reveal

only modest effect sizes and that this leaves much room to explore other reasons for BID in young girls and women (Ferguson, 2009; Ferguson et al., 2011). Media exposure, therefore, should be considered only as one of many contributing risk factors.

Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) contends that women in Western culture are constantly objectified, and that their body is used by others as a way of assessing their personal worth. Through socialization, women internalize that their self-worth is largely based on the way other people view them, and this, in turn, leads to their own continuous sub-conscious social comparisons of their body image to others. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) also bring ample evidence to support their claim that this may be one of the major causes for the rise of eating disorders in the past two decades, and the fact that it is a disorder most commonly found in women. Much research since then has continued to find support for objectification theory as a predictor of disordered eating (Lindner, Tantleff-Dunn, & Jentsch, 2012; Tylka & Hill, 2004).

Although much has been said on the influence of media on internalization of the thin-body image ideal, less is known of peer and family influences. Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory proposes that humans seek out objective standards to assess their own personal worth and subjective status. When objective standards cannot be found, social comparison, (i.e. comparison to relevant others) will be

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: ldlevari@ruppin.ac.il (L. Lev-Ari).

implemented. In most cases, people prefer to compare themselves in a way that helps them perceive themselves more positively, (Morrison, Kalin, & Morrison, 2004). In addition, individuals are more likely to compare themselves to friends and family than to more dissimilar images, and distant images, such as those portrayed in the media (Bosveld, Koomen, & Pligt, 1994). In contrast, research on body image has consistently shown that women tend to compare themselves to other women whom they perceive as more beautiful than themselves, even though this leaves them feeling bad about themselves (Fitzsimmons-Craft, 2011; Morrison et al., 2004; O'Brien et al., 2009), and that this comparison may contribute to body dissatisfaction and to disordered eating (Fitzsimmons-Craft, 2011; Fitzsimmons-Craft, Harney, Brownstone, Higgins, & Bardone-Cone, 2012; O'Brien et al., 2009). It is possible that social comparison of women's body shape is both driven by their objectification, and is a vehicle of body objectification.

Festinger (1954) talks of spontaneous choice of comparison figures, and of the process being spontaneous or in other words pre- or un-conscious. In the current study we hypothesized that indirect comparisons are the more spontaneous, and thus would exert a greater influence on body dissatisfaction than direct more conscious comparisons.

Adolescent girls place much importance on peer's judgment of appearance and this influences their body (dis)satisfaction (Shroff & Thompson, 2006). Peers may influence body dissatisfaction directly through verbal communication, beauty expectations, or by associating beauty with personal worth. There may also be an unconscious focus on bodily comparisons between peers (Ferguson et al., 2011; Matera, Nerini, & Stefanile, 2012).

Most of the research concerning peer influence is based on direct communication of social expectations (Clark & Tiggemann, 2008; Matera et al., 2012). Clark and Tiggemann (2008) showed that for preadolescent girls, social communication by peers was more influential on body dissatisfaction than direct media exposure. They propose that peer's beliefs and attitudes are a significant influence on the way young girls represent their body image, beliefs about appearance and the importance of appearance. In a unique study, 30 10th grade girls underwent semi-structured interviews regarding weight-watching and concerns about body weight. Although none of the girls reported being teased or directly pressured to lose weight, about half reported spontaneously that they compared themselves to their immediate friends and that friends' diets or comments on their weight affected their own self-conscious weight concerns (Wertheim, Paxton, Schutz, & Muir, 1997).

Family may also play a crucial role, in concern for body weight and dieting. The influence of family on body image can be transmitted directly via comments about the body or indirectly, via general familial preoccupation with weight, body image and dieting or disordered eating (Hardit & Hannum, 2012; Kluck, 2010). The family's focus on appearance and the daughter's body dissatisfaction both predict disordered eating, and there is a strong positive correlation between familial criticism, teasing, and encouragement about weight or size with body dissatisfaction (Kluck, 2010). Nonetheless, in a study concerning attachment, media, parent, and peer influence on body dissatisfaction, Hardit and Hannum (2012) found that while media predicted body dissatisfaction, parental or peer criticism did not.

To date, studies concerning the impact of familial and peer pressure on body dissatisfaction have not focused on women's social comparison. Most studies focus on direct communication from others and the impact of this communication on feelings of personal worth. Ferguson et al. (2011) point out that unconscious comparisons to peers might be more influential in body dissatisfaction than conscious comparison to media. In this study we wish to examine the impact of women's own direct, (i.e. conscious), and indirect, (i.e. preconscious), comparisons to significant women surrounding them on their feelings of body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness.

Young women's BMI may exert an influence of its own on drive for thinness and evaluation of body image. In a short longitudinal study, Clark and Tiggemann (2008) found that preadolescent girls with a higher BMI reported more body dissatisfaction and a higher drive for thinness one year later, even after taking into account these measures at outset. They also found that girls with a higher BMI's were prone to more social comparison, less body satisfaction, and a higher drive for thinness. Clark and Tiggemann (2008) study assessed social comparison by girl's reports on appearance-conversations with peers and not on direct subjective comparisons (i.e. asking the girl if she thinks she's fatter than her friends). Although comparisons can be made on many different aspects of appearance, previous studies focus on extreme and unrealistic thinness as they seem to be a central drive of body dissatisfaction. This is why we chose to focus on thinness as a major aspect of BID in this paper.

In this study we examine women's comparison of body image with those of females close to them and the impact of this comparison on their BID, drive for thinness and the disparity of Self-Ideal body image. We also examine the difference between direct and indirect comparisons. In addition we examine the hypothesis that arises from Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory that women will choose comparison figures that enhance their self-esteem. For this to be supported in the current study more than half the women should compare themselves to a best friend that they perceive to be less thin than their own body image. We focus on the best friend since participants cannot choose their mother, and some may have only one sister; but best friends are surely a choice an adult woman can make.

We hypothesized, following Festinger, that women would feel that their mother/sister/friend were heavier than themselves so as to maintain a positive self image.

We asked women to rate their perception of their own body and then to rate their perception of ideal body image, their mother's body shape, their sister closest-in-age body shape, and their closest female friend's body. This comparison is indirect, as women were not asked to compare themselves to these significant women, simply to rate them, each on a separate scale. We then asked these same women directly to compare their own body with that of their mother, sister-closest-in-age, and closest female friend. We hypothesized that: 1. Women would choose comparison figures heavier than themselves (both sisters and best-friends) in order to maintain positive self-esteem. 2. Indirect and direct comparisons would be correlated. 3. Unfavorable comparisons (i.e. feeling that others are thinner than oneself) would be associated with greater self-ideal disparity, higher body dissatisfaction, and more drive to thinness. 4. Indirect comparisons would be more powerful than direct comparisons when predicting drive to thinness and body dissatisfaction.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

All women self-reported on an online questionnaire. Participants were recruited through social networking using a "snowball" procedure. Personal contacts (i.e. friends, family members, other researchers and students) were asked to volunteer and were also requested to send the study on to other female friends and family members. Only women who had sisters were included in the final analysis. In total, 283 Israeli women between the ages of 18–42 (mean = 25.04; SD = 3.53) completed Hebrew online self-reports, including the Figure Rating Scale (FRS), the Eating Disorder Inventory-2's (EDI-2) Drive for Thinness and Body Dissatisfaction subscales, and self reported BMI. About half (50.5%) of our participants were high school graduates, 34.2% had a college degree, and the rest had a graduate degree. Overall this was a representative of middle class women from all parts of Israel, all of whom had internet access.

متن کامل مقاله

دریافت فوری ←

**ISI**Articles

مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات