



The role of self-improvement and self-evaluation motives in social comparisons with idealised female bodies in the media

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Abstract

This study investigates the effect of social comparisons with media models on women's body image based on either self-evaluation or self-improvement motives. Ninety-eight women, for whom appearance was a relevant comparison dimension, viewed advertisements that did, or did not, feature idealised models, after being prompted to engage in self-evaluation or self-improvement comparisons. The results indicate that, when focusing on self-evaluation, comparisons with thin models are associated with higher body-focused anxiety than viewing no model advertisements. In contrast, when focusing on self-improvement, comparisons with thin models are not associated with higher body-focused anxiety than viewing no models. Furthermore, women's general tendency to engage in social comparisons moderated the effects of self-evaluative comparisons with models, so that women who did not habitually engage in social comparisons were most strongly affected. It is suggested that motive for social comparison may explain previous inconsistencies in the experimental exposure literature and warrants more careful attention in future research.

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Introduction

It has been widely reported that idealised media models displayed in the media are unrealistic both in terms of extreme thinness and artificially glamorized attractiveness (Grogan, 1999). A growing body of

research indicates that exposure to ultra-thin models, ubiquitous in the media and advertising, leads to increased body dissatisfaction amongst a large proportion of women (e.g., Dittmar, Stirling, & Halliwell, 2004; Grogan, Williams, & Conner, 1996; Halliwell & Dittmar, 2004a; Heinberg & Thompson, 1995; Posavac, Posavac, & Posavac, 1998). Indeed, a meta-analysis assessing the results of 25 experimental studies demonstrated that young women feel worse after exposure to thin images than other types of images

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(Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). However, some studies have produced inconsistent results, whereby exposure to idealised female models has either no effect (e.g., Champion & Furnham, 1999; Irving, 1990) or a positive effect on women's self-evaluations (e.g., Henderson-King & Henderson-King, 1997; Joshi, Herman, & Polivy, 2004; Mills, Polivy, Herman, & Tiggemann, 2002; Myers & Biocca, 1992). Social comparison theory presents a theoretical framework that may explain these seemingly contradictory findings and, in a recent review of the area, Levine and Harrison (2004) argue that further investigations of appearance-related social comparisons are necessary in order to advance our understanding of media effects.

Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) proposes that individuals continually evaluate themselves in order to assess their own standing on a wide range of characteristics. Originally, Festinger proposed that individuals make subjective comparisons with other people around them only in the absence of objective information about norms and standards, and that the aim of these comparisons is accurate self-evaluation. However, further developments in social comparison theory suggest that subjective social comparisons occur even when objective information is available (Marsh & Parker, 1984; Ruble, 1983) and that individuals are motivated to engage in social comparisons not only for self-evaluation, but also for other motives, such as self-improvement (Wood, 1989).¹ The self-evaluation motive drives judgements about one's ability or standing on a dimension, whereas the self-improvement motive refers to attempts to learn how to, or to be inspired to, improve a particular attribute. The self-improvement motive generally prompts upward comparisons with targets deemed to be inspiring on a particular characteristic. Therefore, it is likely that women who

are invested in their appearance, or are actively attempting to improve their appearance, see models as inspirational figures and use them as comparison targets for self-improvement. Theoretically, self-improvement comparisons can lead to positive or neutral outcomes, so long as the comparison target is not seen as a competitor (Wood, 1989).

Wood (1989) argues that, on occasions, individuals are forced into upward comparisons, as is the case for comparisons with media models. Indeed, young women report making spontaneous comparisons with media models and TV actors (Smith & Leach, 2004). The majority of research on the impact of the media assumes that self-evaluation motivates social comparisons with models and, therefore, posits these upward comparisons will have detrimental effects. However, the inconsistencies in findings of exposure research may be explained by differences in women's motives for social comparisons with models (Martin & Gentry, 1997; Mills et al., 2002). This proposition has received surprisingly little research attention in relation to body image.

Two recent papers demonstrate that restrained and unrestrained eaters respond differently to media exposure; specifically that various self-perceptions of restrained eaters are enhanced or unaffected by viewing thin models. Mills et al. (2002) found that restrained eaters who viewed thin models reported more positive appearance self-esteem than restrained eaters who viewed plus-size models, and they also rated their ideal and actual body size as smaller than restrained eaters who viewed plus-size models or no model, control images. Similarly, Joshi et al., 2004 found that restrained eaters reported higher social self-esteem and a more positive self-image after exposure to thin models than to control images. Furthermore, restrained eaters' appearance self-esteem did not differ after viewing thin models or control images, whereas viewing thin models had a negative impact on unrestrained eaters. Mills et al. (2002) propose that restrained eaters use media models as inspirational figures, because these models represent an ideal self on an important dimension, and that, therefore, the outcome of social comparisons with models can be self-enhancing or neutral.

Mills et al. (2002) and Joshi et al. (2004) were primarily interested in comparing the outcomes of comparisons made by restrained and unrestrained

¹ Self-enhancement is a third type of social comparison motive, but the present study focuses on the effects of self-evaluation and self-improvement motives. Martin and Kennedy (1994) conducted an interview study investigating young women's naturally occurring comparisons with models in advertising. The results indicated that self-enhancement is a relatively uncommon motive for social comparisons with models; instead, self-evaluation and self-improvement represent the most frequent motives for comparisons with models. Indeed, advertising can be seen as actively promoting a self-improvement motivation for comparison through the suggestion that a particular product can make you a more ideal person (Dittmar, 2004, *in press*).

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