

The Frequency, Nature, and Effects of Naturally Occurring Appearance-Focused Social Comparisons

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This research examined the effects of naturally occurring appearance-focused social comparisons on women's affect, body satisfaction, and weight-related cognitions. During their daily activities, women reporting body dissatisfaction ($n=53$) and women reporting body satisfaction ($n=34$) recorded their reactions to comparison information. Body-dissatisfied women engaged in more comparisons and a greater proportion of upward comparisons than body-satisfied women. Upward comparisons were associated with an increase in negative affect, body dissatisfaction, and thoughts of exercising for both groups; however, body-dissatisfied women experienced a greater increase in thoughts of dieting following upward comparisons. The daily effects of comparison information on body-dissatisfied women were examined; upward comparisons were associated with increases in daily negative affect, body dissatisfaction, and weight-related cognitions.

A LARGE PROPORTION OF WOMEN in our society report feeling “too fat” and dissatisfied with their bodies. Rodin, Silberstein, and Striegel-Moore (1984) have referred to this preoccupation with weight and shape among women in our society as a “normative discontent” and note that this discontent leads to feelings of worthlessness and incompetence. In addition, the prevalence of eating disorders has increased significantly over the past few decades (Lucas, Crowson, O’Fallon, & Melton, 1999; Turnbull, Ward, Treasure, Jick, & Derby,

1996), while remaining stable in more recent years (Mazzeo, Espelage, Sherman, & Thompson, 2003). Negative evaluation of weight and shape are central to the diagnosis of such disorders, which has led researchers to theorize that body dissatisfaction is the core psychopathology and the primary and necessary precursor to restrained eating (Cooper & Fairburn, 1993) as well as clinical and subclinical eating disorders (Attie & Brooks-Gunn, 1989; Stice, 1994).

Body image disturbance is a disorder of perception, cognition, and behavior (Rosen, 1992). A subcomponent of this construct, body dissatisfaction, comprises the cognitive-affective component of body image disturbance. Cash and Pruzinsky (2002) and Vitousek and Hollon (1990) assert that body dissatisfaction, or displeasure with some aspect of one's appearance, leads to dysfunctional cognitions regarding weight and shape, such as, “If I am not thin, then I am worthless.” Once these cognitions are activated, various reasoning and information processing errors occur that maintain the dysfunctional beliefs (e.g., confirmatory biases, selective attention, and cognitive rigidity). These recurrent, maladaptive cognitions are then thought to increase the risk for negative emotional (e.g., guilt, shame) and behavioral consequences (e.g., dieting, compensatory behaviors) (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002).

An important etiological factor influencing the development of body dissatisfaction is the internalization of messages regarding the female thin-ideal (Cusumano & Thompson, 1997; Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw, & Stein, 1994). Since the late 1950s, research has shown that the beauty ideal has become increasingly more slender (Garner, Garfinkel, Schwartz, & Thompson, 1980; Silverstein, Perdue, Peterson, & Vogel, 1986; Wiseman, Gray, Mosimann, & Ahrens, 1992). Women who

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internalize these increasingly rigid standards of beauty find themselves unable to attain the “necessary” female body, which leads to body dissatisfaction. Because body dissatisfaction has received substantial empirical support as a precursor to eating disturbances (Cooper & Fairburn, 1993; Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999), further understanding of the mechanisms underlying the development and maintenance of body dissatisfaction is imperative.

Social comparison theory has been utilized to better understand how exposure to the thin-ideal leads to increased body dissatisfaction. Festinger (1954) proposed that individuals compare themselves to others in order to get information regarding where they stand on a particular attribute. Festinger stated that upward comparisons are those in which an individual compares him- or herself with someone believed to be better off, while downward comparisons are those in which someone compares him- or herself with another individual believed to be worse off. Festinger also proposed that social comparisons will affect individuals differently depending on the direction of the comparison. Specifically, he claimed that upward comparisons would produce negative affect and decrease self-esteem, whereas downward comparisons would produce positive affect and increase self-esteem. Research findings have demonstrated the negative effects of upward comparisons (Amoroso & Walters, 1969; Gibbons, 1986; Hackmiller, 1966; Lemyre & Smith, 1985) and the positive effects of downward comparisons (Marsh & Parker, 1984; Morse & Gergen, 1970; Salovey & Rodin, 1984; Tesser, Millar, & Moore, 1988; Testa & Major, 1990). However, none of these findings have used diary methodologies to analyze the effects of comparisons on body dissatisfaction, affect, and cognitions; thus, we must rely on survey and laboratory studies to guide our knowledge of the effects of social comparison on body dissatisfaction, affect, and disordered eating.

Although survey research has found associations between the tendency to engage in appearance-focused comparisons and body image dissatisfaction (Stormer & Thompson, 1996; Thompson, Coovert, & Stormer, 1999), a meta-analysis of 25 studies found that the presentation of media images had a small but consistent negative impact on women’s body satisfaction (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). In a representative study, Stice and Shaw (1994) exposed female undergraduates to thin, average-sized, or no models and found that exposure to the thin models produced depression, stress, guilt, and body dissatisfaction and reduced levels of happiness. In a later study, Heinberg and

Thompson (1995) exposed women with either high or low levels of body dissatisfaction and either high or low levels of thin-ideal internalization to appearance- and non-appearance-related advertisements. Results showed that only those individuals with high levels of body dissatisfaction and high levels of internalization of the thin-ideal experienced heightened distress, specifically anger, depression, and dissatisfaction with their appearance, following exposure to appearance-related material. In contrast, in her research on college-aged women with various levels of bulimic symptomatology, Irving (1990) found that exposure to images of thin fashion models had no effect on body satisfaction and self-esteem; however, exposure to oversize fashion models led to an increase in body satisfaction and self-esteem. It is important to note that none of the aforementioned studies directly analyzed the comparison process; instead, they inferred that individuals were making upward or downward comparisons based on the stimuli provided.

In a study more directly assessing social comparison, Cattarin, Thompson, Thomas, and Williams (2000) exposed female undergraduates to commercials reflecting the culturally sanctioned thin-ideal or neutral, nonappearance-related, material. Within these two exposure conditions, individuals were assigned to one of three groups: (1) the comparison group, who were told to engage in appearance-focused comparisons with the women in the commercials, (2) the neutral group, who were told to watch the commercials as if they were at home, and (3) the distraction group, who were informed to focus on the products being advertised. They found that while viewing appearance-related media, women in the comparison instructional condition reported more body-image disturbance than those in the distraction and neutral conditions. In addition, anger, anxiety, and depression increased significantly in the appearance-related media conditions. In a later study, Tiggemann and McGill (2004) also manipulated instructional set and found that social comparison instructions led to more actual comparisons than appearance-focused instructions, with actual comparisons mediating the impact of the type of media image presented on body dissatisfaction and negative mood.

Only one study (Lin & Kulik, 2002) has directly examined the processes of social comparison by looking at the effects of upward and downward comparisons on body satisfaction and affect. Female undergraduates were exposed to pictures of either thin peers, overweight peers, or no photo at all (control condition). They were then asked to

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