



# The impact of appearance-focused social comparisons on body image disturbance in the naturalistic environment: The roles of thin-ideal internalization and feminist beliefs<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory and its modern applications, this research investigated the relationship between upward appearance-focused social comparisons and body image disturbance using ecological momentary assessment, which allows for examination of these phenomena in their natural context. Participants were 91 undergraduate women who answered questionnaires five times per day for five days using Palm Personal Data Assistant (PDA) devices. Analyses were conducted using hierarchical linear modeling, which allows for examination of longitudinal data both within and across participants. Results revealed a positive relationship between upward appearance-focused social comparisons and body image disturbance. Upward appearance-focused social comparisons were associated with greater body image disturbance for those with higher levels of thin-ideal internalization and with greater body checking for women with lower levels of feminist beliefs. These findings further illuminate the nature of the relationship between social comparisons and body image disturbance.

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## Introduction

Body image disturbance is a multidimensional issue encompassing maladaptive cognitions, affect, and behaviors related to one's body (Cash & Deagle, 1997). Body dissatisfaction, a component of body image disturbance, consists of dysfunctional, negative beliefs and feelings about one's weight and shape (Crowther & Williams, 2011). Body checking, a behavioral component of body image disturbance, consists of repetitively engaging in behaviors that ritualistically evaluate the weight, size and/or appearance of areas of one's body (Reas, Whisenhunt, Netemeyer, & Williamson, 2002). Largely due to Western cultures' focus on an unattainable thin ideal, dissatisfaction with weight and shape is a widespread problem (Heinberg, 1996; Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001), as is engaging in maladaptive behaviors related to this dissatisfaction with one's body (Shafraan, Fairburn, Robinson, & Lask, 2004).

A discrepancy between the ideal body type and the way women perceive and experience their own bodies is so common that it may

be a "normal part of the female experience" within Western culture (Silberstein, Striegel-Moore, & Rodin, 1987, p. 89), a phenomenon which has been referred to as "normative discontent." In fact, over 80% of women in college settings reported body dissatisfaction (Spitzer, Henderson, & Zivian, 1999). These high prevalence rates are problematic because body dissatisfaction is associated with several negative psychological consequences, including depression (Stice, Hayward, Cameron, Killen, & Taylor, 2000), social anxiety (Cash & Labarge, 1996), sexual dysfunction (Wiederman, 2011), and reported suicide attempts (Rodriguez-Cano, Beato-Fernandez, & Llarío, 2006). Additionally, body dissatisfaction is a risk factor for dieting and eating pathology as well as a maintenance factor for bulimic pathology (Stice, 2002); body checking has also been associated with eating psychopathology (Shafraan et al., 2004).

## Social Comparison and Body Image Disturbance

Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) provides a foundation for understanding women's body image disturbance. This theory proposes that people have a drive to determine their progress and standing in life, and they often do so by searching out standards to which they can compare themselves. This theory differentiates two types of social comparisons: upward and downward comparisons. Upward social comparisons occur when individuals compare themselves to perceived superior targets, and downward social comparisons occur when individuals compare

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themselves to perceived inferior targets. Festinger (1954) proposed that upward comparisons were likely to produce negative consequences, such as decreased self-esteem, whereas downward comparisons were likely to produce positive consequences, such as increased self-esteem. Additionally, Festinger's theory posits that people are most likely to make favorable (rather than unfavorable) comparisons to similar others; however, individuals may seek upward comparisons with slightly superior others to gain information on how to improve themselves as long as the comparisons are not harmful (Festinger, 1954; Schutz, Paxton, & Wertheim, 2002).

However, research has shown that when women make upward appearance-focused social comparisons to evaluate their appearance, the effects seem to diverge from Festinger's (1954) original theory. First, although social comparison theory argues that individuals are most likely to compare themselves to similar others, women compare themselves to unrealistic, thin images of women portrayed in the media just as frequently as they compare themselves to similar peers (Strahan, Wilson, Cressman, & Buote, 2006). Second, although social comparison theory argues that people will not continue to make comparisons if they are unfavorable and/or damaging to one's self-image, women frequently make appearance-related social comparisons (Leahey, Crowther, & Mickelson, 2007), even when they experience detrimental consequences (Strahan et al., 2006). One of the primary consequences of appearance-based social comparisons is body image disturbance (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Myers & Crowther, 2009).

Generally, the literature in this area has been characterized by experimental studies, in which women are exposed to thin ideal images in the laboratory setting that are assumed to induce appearance-focused comparisons, and correlational studies, in which women complete paper-and-pencil questionnaires that measure their tendencies to make appearance-focused comparisons. A recent meta-analysis of 156 studies found a consistently strong, positive relationship between social comparison and body dissatisfaction, regardless of whether the study was experimental or correlational (Myers & Crowther, 2009). While this research is valuable, laboratory studies lack ecological validity; because the nature of the comparison is experimentally manipulated, it is difficult to generalize the results to comparisons that occur in the naturalistic environment. Although much of the research done on consequences from thin-ideal media has used media taken from mainstream sources (e.g., Groesz et al., 2002), which are comparable to the images that women view in their natural environment, individuals may view and interact with these images differently when they are presented in the more artificial laboratory setting than in the naturalistic environment (i.e., as slides projected for a specific time rather than in magazines or on a computer screen perused either casually or systematically). Furthermore, correlational methodologies rely heavily on retrospective report, and as a result are subject to recall errors and biases. Recently, ecological momentary assessment (EMA) has been implemented to study the relationships among appearance-focused social comparisons and body image disturbance. EMA samples experiences at the moment they occur in the naturalistic setting and thus maximizes the generalizability of the findings while avoiding the difficulties associated with retrospective recall (Stone & Shiffman, 1994).

More recently, a series of studies have used EMA methodology to examine appearance-focused social comparisons in the naturalistic environment (Leahey et al., 2007; Leahey & Crowther, 2008; Leahey, Crowther, & Ciesla, 2011; Ridolfi, Myers, Crowther, & Ciesla, 2011). Results showed that upward appearance-focused comparisons were associated with greater body dissatisfaction, negative affect, guilt (Leahey et al., 2007, 2011; Ridolfi et al., 2011), body checking (Ridolfi et al., 2011), and thoughts of dieting and exercising (Leahey et al., 2007, 2011). Research also has begun to examine these relationships in greater detail, showing that type

of comparison target (e.g., media versus peer) and appearance-focused cognitive distortions moderate the relationship between upward appearance-focused social comparisons and body dissatisfaction (Leahey & Crowther, 2008) and body checking (Ridolfi et al., 2011). These studies suggest a strong relationship between appearance-focused social comparisons and body dissatisfaction in the naturalistic setting; however, these studies also highlight the importance of examining other potential moderators of this relationship and considering further the impact of these factors on body checking, the behavioral component of body image disturbance.

## Two Potential Moderators: Thin-Ideal Internalization and Feminist Beliefs

Thin-ideal internalization occurs when women assimilate the thin ideal and its associated values (i.e., women must be thin to be considered attractive) into their own world view such that these ideas become guiding principles in their lives (Thompson, van den Berg, Roehrig, Guarda, & Heinberg, 2004). Thin-ideal internalization is problematic because the thin ideal promulgated by the media is often unattainable for most women (Heinberg, 1996; Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001). As a result, thin-ideal internalization is a risk factor for body dissatisfaction (Cafri, Yamimya, Brannick, & Thompson, 2005; Stice, 2002; Stice, Shaw, & Nemeroff, 1998; Thompson & Stice, 2001) and may strengthen the relationship between upward appearance-focused comparisons and body image disturbance.

Appearance-focused social comparisons may be the primary basis for the negative consequences of exposure to the thin ideal by acting as the mechanism whereby individuals are exposed to and begin to assimilate the thin ideal (Bessenoff, 2006; Halliwell & Harvey, 2006; Jones, 2004; Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). Research suggests that within the context of etiological models, thin-ideal internalization serves as a mediator between sociocultural pressures to conform to this ideal and body dissatisfaction (Myers & Crowther, 2007; Stice, 1994, 2002; Thompson & Stice, 2001). In the context of women's day-to-day experiences, thin-ideal internalization is likely a trait variable that changes the nature of the relationship between making an upward appearance-focused comparison and experiencing body image disturbance in the naturalistic environment. The impact of naturalistic social comparisons on body image disturbance is likely greater for those who have internalized the thin ideal because acceptance of unrealistic standards for thinness will increase the likelihood that an appearance-focused comparison is deemed unfavorable.

Feminist beliefs also may moderate the relationship between upward appearance-focused comparisons and body image disturbance. Feminist theory is rooted in the assertion that women should be seen as equals to men and respected for their accomplishments (e.g., NOW, 1966). Additionally, feminist theory provides a unique perspective on the development and maintenance of body image disturbances among women (Heinberg, 1996). Smolak and Murnen (2004) argue that body image disturbance is a "gendered" problem caused by issues of power and self-objectification. Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), a common feminist explanation for gender differences in body dissatisfaction, argues that society views women as objects and thus focuses on their bodies rather than their abilities. Women who internalize these messages may be vulnerable to body image disturbance.

Feminist beliefs may serve as a protective factor against body image disturbance for women (Ojerholm & Rothblum, 1999; Piran, 1999; Rubin, Nemeroff, & Russo, 2004; Tiggemann & Stevens, 1999). Although all women are exposed to the thin ideal through the media, holding higher levels of feminist beliefs may serve as a buffer (Myers & Crowther, 2007), giving women a different lens through which to interpret sociocultural messages about women's bodies (Rubin et al., 2004). However, the relationship is complex. Even

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