



# Self-concept clarity, thin-ideal internalization, and appearance-related social comparison as predictors of body dissatisfaction



Lenny R. Vartanian\*, Shanta Dey

School of Psychology, The University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the associations among self-concept clarity, thin-ideal internalization, appearance-related social comparison tendencies, and body dissatisfaction. Female university students ( $N=278$ ) completed self-report measures of these constructs. Structural equation modeling revealed several key findings: (a) thin-ideal internalization mediated the link between appearance-related social comparison tendencies and body dissatisfaction; (b) self-concept clarity was negatively associated with both thin-ideal internalization and appearance-related social comparison tendencies; and (c) thin-ideal internalization mediated the link between self-concept clarity and body dissatisfaction. These findings suggest that low self-concept clarity might contribute to body image problems because it increases women's vulnerability to thin-ideal internalization and appearance-related social comparison tendencies.

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## Introduction

Body image concerns are highly prevalent among university-aged women (Berg, Frazier, & Sherr, 2009; Mintz & Betz, 1988; Neighbors & Sobal, 2007). Negative body image has been associated with depression, stress, and low self-esteem (Johnson & Wardle, 2005) and can be a maintenance factor for disordered eating (Stice, 2002). Given the range of problems associated with negative body image, researchers have been motivated to identify the factors that contribute to women feeling dissatisfied with their bodies. One influential model—the Tripartite Influence Model—describes how social influence from media, parents, and peers can predict body image and eating disturbances. In particular, this model suggests that these social influences are mediated by both internalization of the thin ideal and a tendency towards appearance-related social comparisons (e.g., Keery, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004; Shroff & Thompson, 2006). The present study aims to extend this model by examining an important intrapersonal variable—the extent to which people have a clear and stable sense of their own identity—that can predict individual differences in thin-ideal internalization and appearance-related social comparison tendencies.

Past research illustrates that women's body image can be negatively affected by their internalization of the thin ideal (Cafri,

Yamamiya, Brannick, & Thompson, 2005). The ultra-thin idealized bodies that are frequently presented in the media are extremely difficult, if not impossible, for most women to achieve. Consequently, women who aspire to (i.e., who have internalized) the thin ideal and who fail to achieve this ideal will in turn experience negative feelings about their bodies. Numerous studies have demonstrated an association between women's internalization of the thin ideal and their body dissatisfaction, including correlational (e.g., Vartanian, 2009), prospective (e.g., Stice, 2001), and experimental studies (e.g., Nouri, Hill, & Orelle-Valente, 2011). The robust nature of this association is supported by recent meta-analyses (e.g., Cafri et al., 2005; Stice, 2002).

Another factor that can contribute to negative body image among women is the tendency to make appearance-related social comparisons. Women tend to evaluate their appearance against women who they perceive to be superior to themselves (upward comparisons; Leahey, Crowther, & Mickelson, 2007). It has been suggested that women might compare themselves to thinner women for inspiration (Mills, Polivy, Herman, & Tiggemann, 2002). However, these upward comparisons generally induce greater body dissatisfaction (Bailey & Ricciardelli, 2010; Bessenoff, 2006; Leahey et al., 2007). Indeed, meta-analyses have found that when women compare themselves to thinner targets, they experience increased dissatisfaction with their bodies (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Myers & Crowther, 2009). There is also some evidence that exposure to less attractive others (i.e., downward comparisons) might induce more positive self-evaluations (e.g., Leahey et al., 2007), but other research has found that a general tendency to make

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +61 2 9385 8758; fax: +61 2 9385 3641.

E-mail addresses: [lvartanian@psy.unsw.edu.au](mailto:lvartanian@psy.unsw.edu.au), [lenny.r.vartanian@gmail.com](mailto:lenny.r.vartanian@gmail.com) (L.R. Vartanian).

appearance-based comparisons (both upward and downward) is significantly associated with eating disturbance (O'Brien et al., 2009). Thus, a chronic tendency to make appearance-based social comparisons may be associated with negative outcomes regardless of the direction of those comparisons.

Although there is clear evidence that thin-ideal internalization and appearance-related social comparison tendencies can adversely impact body image, there is relatively little research examining the connection between those two risk factors, and there is ambiguity in the joint role that these factors share in predicting body dissatisfaction. For example, research on the Tripartite Influence Model suggests that thin-ideal internalization mediates the association between appearance-based social comparisons and body dissatisfaction (e.g., Halliwell & Harvey, 2006; Keery et al., 2004; Rodgers, Chabrol, & Paxton, 2011; Shroff & Thompson, 2006). Other research, however, has examined social comparison tendencies as a mediator of the link between thin-ideal internalization and body dissatisfaction and found mixed results. One study found that the extent to which preadolescent girls compared their physical appearance to others (partially) mediated the relationship between their thin-ideal internalization and body dissatisfaction (Blowers, Loxton, Grady-Flessler, Occhipinti, & Dawe, 2003). Another study testing university-aged women, however, failed to produce that same effect (Fitzsimmons-Craft, Harney, Koehler, Danzi, Riddell, & Bardone-Cone, 2012), which the authors suggest may have been due to the fact that upward and downward comparisons were not differentiated in their study. Thus, the joint role of appearance-based social comparison tendencies and thin-ideal internalization in predicting body dissatisfaction needs to be clarified.

In order to develop a better understanding of the factors that contribute to negative body image, it is also important to identify the factors that predict thin-ideal internalization and appearance-related social comparison tendencies. In addition to the social factors that form part of the Tripartite Influence Model (media, parents, and peers), it can be important to examine personality characteristics and other individual-difference variables. One individual-difference variable that might hold promise in this regard is self-concept clarity. Self-concept clarity is defined as “the extent to which the contents of an individual’s self-concept (e.g., perceived personal attributes) are clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and temporally stable” (Campbell, Trapnell, Heine, Katz, Lavallee, & Lehman, 1996, p. 141). Because individuals who are low in self-concept clarity lack a clear sense of their own identity, they might seek out and become vulnerable to the influence of external sources that can help define the self; in contrast, individuals high in self-concept clarity should be less influenced by external guides because they have a strong sense of their own personal identity. For women, societal standards of attractiveness can be a highly accessible external source used to define the self. Consequently, women low in self-concept clarity may be more likely to internalize the thin ideal and may be more likely to engage in appearance-related social comparison.

An early theoretical perspective suggested that identity disturbance might lead to internalization of societal standards of attractiveness (Stice, 1994). To date, however, only two studies have provided empirical support for this suggestion. Cahill and Mussap (2007) reported that low self-concept clarity was associated with a greater degree of thin-ideal internalization. Vartanian (2009) replicated that finding and further demonstrated that thin-ideal internalization mediated the relation between self-concept clarity and body image concerns. Thus, there is some preliminary evidence implicating self-concept clarity as a predictor of internalization of the thin ideal and body image concerns.

No study in the body image literature has examined the connection between self-concept clarity and appearance-related social comparison tendencies, although a few studies from the social

psychology literature have suggested that these two constructs are related. Festinger’s (1954) social comparison theory proposes that individuals uncertain of their sense of self will be highly motivated to compare themselves to others so that they can better understand how and where they fit into society. Supporting that hypothesis, studies have found that individuals low in self-concept clarity are more inclined to engage in social comparisons compared to those high in self-concept clarity (Butzer & Kuiper, 2006; Stapel & Tesser, 2001<sup>1</sup>). One might similarly expect that low self-concept clarity would predict social comparisons in the body image domain. Furthermore, just as internalization has been found to mediate the association between self-concept clarity and body image concerns, one might also expect that appearance-related comparison tendencies would mediate the association between self-concept clarity and body dissatisfaction.

## The Present Study

The aim of this study was to investigate the associations among self-concept clarity, thin-ideal internalization, and upward and downward appearance comparison tendencies, and to determine how these factors may in turn predict body dissatisfaction among university-aged women. We tested two different models, one in which thin-ideal internalization served as the mediator between appearance-based social comparison tendencies and body dissatisfaction, and a second in which appearance-based social comparison tendencies served as the mediator between thin-ideal internalization and body dissatisfaction, to clarify the nature of these associations due to mixed findings in the literature. We also tested the hypothesis that self-concept clarity would be related to thin-ideal internalization and appearance-related social comparison tendencies, which in turn would mediate the association between self-concept clarity and body dissatisfaction. The findings of the present study may facilitate earlier identification of women who are vulnerable to body image concerns.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 278 undergraduate female students from a first-year psychology course at a large public university. One participant was excluded because she failed to complete the majority of the questionnaires. Participants’ mean age was 19.7 years (range = 17–55<sup>2</sup>), and their mean body mass index (BMI; based on self-reported height and weight) was 21.4 (range = 14–38). Of those who reported their ethnicity, 115 (41.7%) were White, 119 (43.1%) were Asian, 1 (0.4%) was Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander, and 41 (14.9%) identified as “other.” All participants were given course credit for their participation. This study was approved by the university’s ethics committee.

### Measures and Procedure

Participants signed up for a study that was described as an investigation of students’ adjustment to university life. After providing written consent, each participant completed a series of questionnaires on a lab computer. These measures included:

<sup>1</sup> The Levelt Committee found no evidence of scientific fraud in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Twelve participants were older than 24 years of age, and therefore outside of the range of the typical university student. Restricting the sample to those individuals who were 24 years or younger did not change the results. Thus, we retained the full sample in our analyses.

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