



The connection of teasing by parents, siblings, and peers with girls' body dissatisfaction and boys' drive for muscularity: The role of social comparison as a mediator



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ABSTRACT

In this cross-sectional study, we focused on three research questions pertaining to the connections between appearance-related teasing and body image during adolescence. First, we investigated how parental appearance-related teasing of adolescents was associated with teasing by siblings. Second, we examined how teasing by mothers, fathers, siblings, and peers was individually associated with adolescent girls' body dissatisfaction and boys' drive for muscularity. We included BMI as a possible moderator in these analyses. Third, we tested the role of appearance-related social comparison as a mediator of the relations between teasing and body image. Self-report survey data were collected from 80 girls and 78 boys in a Midwestern U.S. middle school. Results from correlational and odds-ratio analyses indicated that teasing by mothers and fathers was strongly associated with teasing by siblings. Additionally, in regression analyses, mothers', fathers', siblings', and peers' teasing were separately associated with girls' body dissatisfaction and boys' drive for muscularity. Social comparison partially mediated the relationship between all sources of teasing and girls' body dissatisfaction as well as the relationship between mothers' and fathers' teasing and boys' drive for muscularity. Social comparison fully mediated the link between peers' teasing and boys' drive for muscularity. Researchers and clinicians should be aware of how family members and peers can influence adolescents' development of body image concerns through teasing behaviors and by social comparison.

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1. Introduction

Body image is a multidimensional construct that refers to how individuals experience and perceive their bodies and the attitudes they form about their bodies (Rieves & Cash, 1996). Body image concerns may begin as early as age 6 for both girls and boys in the United States, with an increase occurring during the adolescent years (Spitzer, Henderson, & Zivian, 1999). Attention should be given to differences between females and males as Western cultural expectations differ, with females expected to have thin bodies and males expected to have muscular bodies. Indeed, research has shown that the most common source of body image concern among adolescents is thinness for girls and muscularity for boys (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2006; Jones & Crawford, 2005; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001). Boys may be satisfied with their body fat or wish to lose body fat while simultaneously desiring to become more muscular (Tylka, 2011). In the present study,

we focus on body dissatisfaction among girls and drive for muscularity among boys. Body dissatisfaction refers to an unhappiness regarding specific areas of the body that are often associated with shape changes or increased adiposity, such as the thighs, stomach, and hips (Garner, Olmstead, & Polivy, 1983). Drive for muscularity refers to concerns regarding muscularity, satisfaction with muscle mass, and attempts to increase muscle (McCreary & Sasse, 2000).

Adolescence is an important time to focus on the factors that contribute to body image due to the heightened importance of appearance during this time period. In addition, puberty sets the stage for an increase of concerns about body image due to the body undergoing external physical changes (Ata, Ludden, & Lally, 2007). For example, the majority of girls' bodies move away from the Western thin ideal as a result of pubertal changes involving gains in weight and height, which typically lead to increased body dissatisfaction (Stice & Whitenton, 2002). In contrast, while boys' bodies generally move closer to the muscular ideal, both late-maturing and early-maturing boys tend to be concerned with their muscle mass and engage in strategies to increase muscle size, such as muscle-building exercises or the use of food supplements (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004). Therefore, it is necessary to focus on factors associated with the development of body image concerns during adolescence, specifically within the U.S. where these issues are

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prevalent and may lead to increased risk of disordered eating as well as full-blown eating disorders among both females and males (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2004; Rodgers, Ganchou, Franko, & Chabrol, 2012; Stice, 2002).

1.1. Appearance-related teasing

Teasing by family members and peers is widespread and common among American adolescents (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Story, 2003; Taylor, 2011). Teasing can be either negative or positive but is typically considered to be negative with the sole purpose of asserting social dominance by hurting, humiliating, or harassing another (Kruger, Gordon, & Kuban, 2006; Shapiro, Baumeister, & Kessler, 1991). Teasing can become particularly harmful when it is directed at personal features associated with physical appearance (Kruger et al., 2006; Shapiro et al., 1991; Thompson, Fabian, Moulton, Dunn, & Altabe, 1991). Any reinforcement and attention given to appearance, especially in the form of teasing, draws attention to an individual's body and encourages social comparison to others based on physical attributes (Jones, 2004). Particularly for girls during the adolescent period, teasing can be a form of objectification wherein others, especially males, provide criticism and feedback about girls' bodies as objects that do not meet the Western cultural ideal of thinness and beauty.

Research has indicated that both girls and boys experience teasing about their bodies and appearance during adolescence (Eisenberg et al., 2003; McCormack et al., 2011; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2002; Taylor, 2011). For example, among American adolescents, appearance-related teasing by peers was reported by 30–37% of girls and 24–44% of boys, and appearance-related teasing by family members was reported by 28–40% of girls and 16–33% of boys (Eisenberg et al., 2003; McCormack et al., 2011). These studies did not, however, consider each family member separately. When considering mothers and fathers separately, 19% of middle school-aged girls had experienced appearance-related teasing by their fathers and 13% experienced it from their mothers (Keery, Boutelle, Berg, & Thompson, 2005). Of these same girls, 29% also reported being teased about their appearance by their siblings (Keery et al., 2005). Thus, it appears as though appearance-related teasing is a prevalent problem among American youth.

Adolescent girls who experience appearance-related teasing from family members are more likely to participate in unhealthy weight control behavior, have a higher level of body dissatisfaction, and are more invested in achieving thinness (Eisenberg et al., 2003; Keery et al., 2005; McCormack et al., 2011; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2010). Additionally, adolescent boys who are teased by their parents tend to have low levels of body satisfaction and a greater drive for muscularity (Eisenberg et al., 2003; McCormack et al., 2011; Smolak & Stein, 2006). Appearance-related teasing by parents likely increases adolescents' body image concerns by reinforcing societal values of appearance and emphasizing adherence to cultural ideals. Parental teasing can also have indirect effects through siblings, as the modeling of parents' teasing behaviors, particularly fathers', may be associated with higher levels of sibling teasing (Keery et al., 2005).

The siblings most commonly cited by adolescents as appearance-related teasers tend to be older brothers (Keery et al., 2005). One study found that 79% of college-aged women who had brothers reported being teased by their brothers during adolescence (Rieves & Cash, 1996). Brothers were identified as the worst teasers by 33% of the women, whereas sisters were identified as the worst teasers by only 8% (Rieves & Cash, 1996). Teasing by an older brother has been correlated with negative body image (Keery et al., 2005). To this date, however, only a few studies have examined the effects of appearance-related teasing by siblings; therefore, it is important to gain a better understanding of how sibling behaviors may be associated with body image among adolescents.

Appearance-related teasing by peers is also associated with an increase in body dissatisfaction among adolescents (Eisenberg et al.,

2003; Jones, 2004; McCormack et al., 2011; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2002; Phares, Steinberg, & Thompson, 2004), with a particularly strong correlation for girls. Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) offers an explanation for the strong connection between teasing and body image in girls, such that girls are likely to internalize thinness-related commentary from others and, in turn, view themselves as unattractive objects to the opposite sex for failing to attain the thin ideal. The connection between drive for muscularity and appearance-related teasing among adolescent boys has recently become a topic of research studies, yet the relationship has not been well-established. Of the research that has focused on appearance-related teasing and drive for muscularity, many of the studies have combined teasing with other sociocultural factors such as pressure and feedback regarding weight (e.g., McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003; Smolak, Murnen, & Thompson, 2005; Stanford & McCabe, 2005; Tylka, 2011). Yet, teasing has been associated with weight-lifting in middle school-aged boys (McVey, Tweed, & Blackmore, 2005). Another study found that peer teasing was correlated with adolescent boys' attitudes but not behaviors regarding muscularity (Smolak & Stein, 2006). Peers are likely to be particularly influential during adolescence, as peer relations intensify and more time is spent together.

A recent meta-analysis of the effects of teasing by family members and peers on body image indicated that medium effect sizes existed, ranging from .32 to .43, for both females and males (Menzel et al., 2010). This suggests that teasing has detrimental effects on adolescents' perceptions of themselves. Not only does teasing influence adolescents during the time it occurs, but the effects of appearance-related teasing can last into adulthood and beyond (Ata et al., 2007). Because of the negative and potential long-lasting impact of teasing on adolescents, it is essential to thoroughly examine the perpetrators of teasing and both the direct and indirect effects these individuals have on a particularly vulnerable age group.

Because Body Mass Index (BMI; weight [kg]/height [m²]) is a strong predictor of body image, it may be influential in the relationship between teasing and body image (Menzel et al., 2010; Stice, 2002). In particular, some research has suggested that adolescents who are above or below average weight are not only more likely to develop a negative body image but also experience more teasing and other sociocultural pressures to meet the thin and muscular ideals (McCormack et al., 2011; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2002; Stice & Whitenton, 2002). Due to being overweight or underweight, these individuals tend to be targets of pressures to meet the cultural size expectations because they vary the farthest from the ideals (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2002). In contrast, a qualitative study assessing weight-based teasing during adolescence found that even healthy-weight girls were teased about their body size (Taylor, 2011). Similarly, previous research that has either investigated the possible predictive role of BMI on body image or controlled for BMI when examining the connection between appearance-related teasing and body image have found no significant effect of BMI (Keery et al., 2005; Smolak & Stein, 2006). Due to the conflicting nature of these bodies or research, it is important to include BMI as a possible moderator in the connections between teasing and body image.

1.2. The role of social comparison

According to Social Comparison theory, individuals compare themselves to others in order to evaluate themselves (Festinger, 1954). Appearance-related social comparison is the process of comparing one's body and looks to others for the purpose of gathering information about highly valued attributes and societal expectations associated with appearance in order to make a judgment about one's own appearance (Jones, 2001; Smolak et al., 2005). Given that appearance is one of the perceived routes to acceptance and popularity during adolescence, social comparison becomes an important method for learning about appearance-related expectations among peers and for evaluating oneself based on those standards (Jones, 2001).

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