A diary study of appearance social comparisons and need frustration in young women

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

Keywords:
Social comparisons
Self-Determination Theory
Ecological Momentary Assessment
Dietary restriction

A B S T R A C T

The purpose of the study was to examine the effects of state upward appearance comparisons and psychological need frustration on appearance self-conscious emotions, and compensatory dieting and exercise thoughts and behaviours. An Ecological Momentary Assessment design was employed with young women (n = 126; M_age = 21.26; SD = 2.76) who responded to surveys 3 times daily every other day for 1 week. Outcome measures included body and appearance self-conscious emotions (shame, guilt, and authentic and hubristic pride) and (thoughts of) dietary restriction and exercise. Mixed linear modelling showed that upward appearance comparisons and psychological need frustration independently predicted several maladaptive appearance-based emotions and behaviours. For thoughts of dietary restriction, an interaction emerged, whereby thoughts of dietary restriction were intensified in situations when participants engaged in upward appearance comparisons and reported high levels of need frustration. The findings suggest that not only upward appearance comparisons but also high levels of state need frustration can make women more vulnerable to self-conscious emotions and compensatory dieting and exercise thoughts and behaviours.

1. Introduction

Festinger’s (1954) Social Comparison Theory (SCT) has been used as a framework to understand how individuals form judgments about their appearance (Corning, Krumm, & Smitham, 2006). According to Festinger, in judging the adequacy of their own pertinent attributes, individuals may engage in three different types of comparisons. Upward social comparisons refer to individuals comparing themselves to someone who they perceive to be superior on a specific attribute. Downward comparisons refer to situations in which individuals perceive themselves to be superior to the comparison target. Finally, lateral comparisons refer to situations in which the individual judges herself to be similar to the target person.

In the appearance domain, results of empirical studies have shown that upward appearance comparisons are consistently associated with negative body image outcomes, including body dissatisfaction, because engaging in such comparisons highlights perceived physical appearance inadequacies (Leahey, Crowther, & Mickelson, 2007). SCT asserts that if an individual is dissatisfied with their appearance, behaviour will be directed at minimising existing discrepancies (Corning et al., 2006). This may entail adopting health-threatening compensatory weight control behaviours. Indeed, the tendency to engage in upward comparisons has been found to predict eating pathology in college-aged females (e.g., Arigo, Schumacher, & Martin, 2014).

1.1. Self-conscious emotions

Research on appearance comparisons to date has mainly focused on its consequences for body dissatisfaction and compensatory behaviours, while far less attention has been afforded to pertinent emotional body-image outcomes. The self-conscious emotions of shame, guilt, and pride are important in the regulation of cognitions, feelings and behaviours, and are relevant to the appearance domain (e.g., Tangney & Tracy, 2012). Body shame has been associated with social physique anxiety (Thompson, Dinnel, & Dill, 2003), disordered eating (Gupta, Rosenthal, Mancini, Cheavens, & Lynch, 2008) and other negative outcomes (e.g., Lamont, 2015). Guilt can be evoked through negative behaviours, such as overeating or not exercising. While it is a negative emotional
response, if it is not accompanied by shame, it can lead to ‘reparative’ behaviours (e.g., engaging in healthy behaviours following lapses; Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996). Finally, appearance-related pride can arise as a result of feeling that one exhibits positive appearance characteristics, such as a lean fit body (Tracy & Robins, 2007). Pride may be authentic or hubristic in orientation. Authentic pride may emanate from engagement in specific behavioural acts, such as eating healthily. In contrast, hubristic pride denotes feelings of superiority over others, such as having a more attractive body compared to peers (Castonguay, Gilchrist, Mack, & Sabiston, 2013). Both types of pride have been associated with positive outcomes including self-esteem, low levels of depressive symptoms, and high positive/low negative affect (Castonguay, Sabiston, Croker, & Mack, 2014).

As all these emotions are socially motivated (Tangney & Salovey, 2010), they are highly relevant outcomes to examine when studying appearance comparisons. Hence, in the present study, we contributed to the appearance comparisons literature by considering not only compensatory weight control behaviours and cognitions, but also emotional consequences of upward appearance comparisons.

1.2. Ecological momentary assessment

Most studies to date on social comparisons and body image outcomes have used cross-sectional survey (e.g., Lindner, Tantleff-Dunn, & Jentsch, 2012), or laboratory methods (e.g., Homan, McHugh, Wells, Watson, & King, 2012). In cross-sectional survey studies, researchers typically examine associations between tendencies and emotions assessed in daily life. Alternatively, these studies have employed longitudinal methods in which they report low levels of need frustration (H2). Finally, when on days when the participants reported that their needs were frustrated, they were more likely to engage in binge eating behaviour. However, the Verstuyf et al. study did not consider how state experiences of need frustration interact with upward appearance comparisons in the prediction of body image outcomes. Given research demonstrates that psychological need frustration interact with upward appearance comparisons to influence daily experiences of need frustration and their associations with binge eating in female adolescents (n = 302). They found that on days when the participants reported that their needs were frustrated, they were more likely to engage in binge eating behaviour. However, the Verstuyf et al. study did not consider how state experiences of need frustration interact with upward appearance comparisons in the prediction of body image outcomes. Given research demonstrates that psychological need frustration interact with upward appearance comparisons in the prediction of body image outcomes. When individuals' needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are frustrated, they develop coping resources in the form of need substitutes and/or compensatory behaviours (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Need substitutes can be manifested through the endorsement of the thin-ideal, body image concerns, and compensatory behaviours such as rigid and restrictive eating patterns (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

One important limitation of the work on psychological needs to date is the tendency to assess psychological needs at the trait level. To our knowledge, only one published study has examined the role of daily need frustration in predicting body-image relevant outcomes. Specifically, Verstuyf, Vansteenkiste, Soenens, Boone, and Mouratidis (2013) looked at daily experiences of need frustration and their associations with binge eating in female adolescents (n = 302). They found that on days when the participants reported that their needs were frustrated, they were more likely to engage in binge eating behaviour. However, the Verstuyf et al. study did not consider how state experiences of need frustration interact with upward appearance comparisons in the prediction of body image outcomes. Given research demonstrates that psychological need frustration interact with upward appearance comparisons in the prediction of body image outcomes. When individuals experience high levels of need frustration and disordered eating (Bartholomew et al., 2011), we expect that psychological need frustration is likely to exacerbate any negative impacts of upward appearance comparisons.

1.4. Study aims

This study represents the first attempt to integrate key constructs from both SCT and SDT in the prediction of body-image related outcomes employing an EMA design. It is proposed that daily experiences of need frustration will magnify the negative associations between upward appearance comparisons and a range of emotional, cognitive and behavioural body image outcomes. Specifically, first, we hypothesise that in situations when participants engage in upward appearance comparisons, they will report greater levels of body-related shame and guilt, lower levels of pride, and will be more likely to think about and engage in compensatory behaviours (dietary restriction and exercise for weight control) than when they do not engage in upward appearance comparisons (H1). Second, when participants experience high levels of psychological need frustration, they will experience similar outcomes as those outlined for H1 compared to situations in which they report low levels of need frustration (H2). Finally, when individuals experience high levels of psychological need frustration and...
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