

A Person-by-Situation Account of Why Some People More Frequently Engage in Upward Appearance Comparison Behaviors in Everyday Life

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Although the influence of stable, trait-like factors (such as trait body dissatisfaction and appearance internalization) on instances of appearance comparison has been well documented, the additive and interactive influence of contextual factors (such as one's current body satisfaction) on comparison behaviors is unknown. Therefore, the present study tested a Person \times Situation model in which both state and trait body image variables interacted to predict engagement in various forms of comparison (upward, downward, and lateral). Participants included 161 women who completed a baseline measure of trait body dissatisfaction and internalization, and then completed, via an iPhone app, an ecological momentary assessment phase in which they reported momentary experiences of mood and comparison behaviors at up to 6 random times per day for 7 days. Multilevel analyses revealed that upward comparisons (comparisons against more attractive people) were more likely for individuals with heightened trait and/or state

negative body image, but these predictive effects of state and trait on appearance comparisons appear largely independent of each other. Furthermore, neither state nor trait body image variables were related to the other forms of comparison, and time lag at the state-level between predictor and outcome did not seem to influence the strength of these associations. Present findings are consistent with the notion that how an individual feels in the moment about their appearance may influence engagement in deleterious appearance behaviors. However, further testing is needed to confirm these causal hypotheses.

Keywords: appearance comparisons; body image disturbance; ecological momentary assessment; thin ideal; internalization

SOCIAL COMPARISON THEORY (Festinger, 1954) proposed that engaging in comparison with others occurs regularly. These comparisons may be upward (i.e., against someone closer to one's ideal), lateral (comparing against someone who is similar), or downward (comparing against an individual further from the particular ideal). Within the context of body image, upward appearance comparisons seem to be more common than downward comparisons (e.g., Leahey, Crowther,

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& Mickelson, 2007; O'Brien et al., 2009; Ridolfi, Myers, Crowther, & Ciesla, 2011). For instance, Ridolfi et al. (2011) tracked a sample of female undergraduate students for a period of 5 days using ecological momentary assessment (EMA) and found that upward comparisons were twice as common as downward comparisons when the comparison target was a peer, and approximately three times as common when media comparisons were undertaken. Leahey et al. (2007) showed that for women with heightened trait body dissatisfaction, upward comparisons made during a 1-week testing period were four times more common than downward comparisons, whereas the number of upward and downward comparisons were roughly equal for women with low trait body dissatisfaction levels. The relative frequency of lateral comparisons remains unclear as they are seldom reported in these ecological assessment studies.

The prevalence and intra-individual persistence of upward appearance-related comparisons are surprising for several reasons. First, as the idealized thin physique (the "thin ideal") for women in Western cultures is recognized as being difficult—if not impossible—for most women to attain, it presents a thoroughly unrealistic comparison to strive for (Spitzer, Henderson, & Zivian, 1999). Whereas in other domains, such as academic achievement, upward comparisons tend to be made against similar targets and thus drive motivation to improve (Dijkstra, Kuyper, van der Werf, Buunk, & van der Zee, 2008), upward appearance comparisons tend to be against dissimilar targets, such as the thin ideal (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Myers & Crowther, 2009), and hence may be expected to promote negative feelings about one's self as the individual falls short of their appearance-related goal (Appel, Crusius, & Gerlach, 2015; Myers, Ridolfi, Crowther, & Ciesla, 2012).

Second, individuals continue to engage in these comparisons despite the negative consequences that often follow an instance of appearance comparison. Engagement in upward appearance comparisons have been associated with a range of unhealthy consequences, including lowered self-esteem (Appel et al., 2015), negative mood (Ridolfi et al., Myers, Crowther, & Ciesla, 2011), increased guilt (Leahey, Crowther, & Ciesla, 2011), decreased body satisfaction (Myers et al., 2012), and eating disorder pathology (Arigo, Schumacher, & Martin, 2014). While not limited to this group, individuals with body image disturbances (e.g., those with heightened trait body dissatisfaction, extreme level endorsement of the importance of physical appearance, or eating pathology) seem more likely to engage in these upward comparisons (Leahey et al.,

2007, Leahey et al., 2011) and show stronger negative effects post-comparison in terms of thoughts of dieting and exercise, negative mood, and body dissatisfaction (Fitzsimmons-Craft et al., 2012; Leahey et al., 2011; Myers et al., 2012). Accordingly, these comparison behaviors may thus serve to perpetuate and exacerbate their preexisting body image concerns.

Despite the justifiable focus on upward comparisons in the majority of these prior studies, those studies that included measures of downward comparisons show that both forms of comparison may occur regularly within the same individuals (e.g., Leahey et al., 2007; Ridolfi et al., 2011). Unfortunately, whereas a trait-based approach (e.g., trait body dissatisfaction or internalization as a predictor) can predict who is more likely to engage in upward comparisons in general, it is insufficiently nuanced to predict *when* such individuals are more or less likely to engage in instances of comparisons whether upward, downward, or lateral. Person by Situation Theory (Mischel & Shoda, 1995) may provide greater insight into this issue, as it proposes that the occurrence of a specific behavior jointly depends upon individual traits and contextual influences (e.g., current mood state, whether one is accompanied by friends, etc.). Thus, an individual may have a general tendency towards a particular behavior, but the likelihood of this occurring at a given point in time, and leading to a particular outcome, depends on prevailing contextual factors. For instance, an individual with trait body dissatisfaction and/or who internalizes the thin ideal may, in general, be more likely to engage in upward comparisons (relative to non-comparison), yet the risk of this occurring may be greater in instances where she feels negatively and lesser when she feels positively about her appearance.

To date, experimental and ecological momentary assessment studies have focused on characteristics of the comparator (e.g., stranger vs known other, similar vs dissimilar comparator, etc.) as contextual determinants of the consequences of appearance comparisons (Knobloch-Westerwick & Romero, 2011; Krones, Stice, Batres, & Orjada, 2005; Leahey & Crowther, 2008; McKee et al., 2013). Largely neglected from these comparisons are contextual factors such as one's immediate affect level, rather than characteristics of the comparator.

We argue that there are several bases to suspect that one's state body satisfaction (i.e., how they feel about their appearance at a given moment) may directly influence the likelihood of engaging in an appearance comparison, the type of comparison they make (i.e., upward, downward, or lateral), and may also reduce/increase the likelihood of such behavior

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