



The effects of modeling dietary restraint on food consumption: Do restrained models promote restrained eating?

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Abstract

Sixty-nine female undergraduates completed the restraint scale, a dieting checklist, and the Eating Attribution Style Questionnaire (EASQ). The participants were exposed either to no model, a peer model who behaviorally demonstrated dietary restraint, or a peer model who behaviorally and verbally demonstrated dietary restraint. The participants had an opportunity to consume food as part of a taste test. The findings revealed that attribution style, but not restraint or current dieting status, moderated the effects of exposure to the peer models. Females who had an internal attribution style for indulgent food consumption decreased their consumption of food as a function of the dietary restraint of the models, whereas females who had an external attribution style for indulgent food consumption increased their consumption of food as a function of the dietary restraint of the models. The latter disinhibitory effect was attributed to negative social comparison and learned helplessness. The results supported the conclusion that the effectiveness of modeling dietary restraint is dependent on the attribution style of the observers. © 2004 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Social comparison is a process that affects females' body image and attempts to control their weight (Roth, Herman, Polivy, & Pliner, 2001). Females often compare themselves with the ideal thin women depicted in the media (Cusumano & Thompson, 1997; Kalonder, 1997) and to the body shapes and eating patterns of peers (Roth et al., 2001). With respect to the latter, studies have shown that females consumed more food when exposed to a peer model who had consumed a large than small amount of food (e.g., Polivy, Herman, Younger, & Erskine, 1979). The present study was designed to examine

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whether (a) exposure to a peer model who behaviorally, as well as verbally, demonstrates dietary restraint results in the inhibition of food consumption and (b) individual differences in dietary restraint and attribution styles for food consumption moderate those effects.

1.1. Media images

Researchers have found that exposing females to media images of thinness increases their feelings of depression, unhappiness, shame, and body dissatisfaction (Kalonder, 1997; Stice & Shaw, 1994). Studies indicate that those effects are moderated by individual differences. Females with high, rather than low, body image disturbances or dissatisfaction became more dissatisfied with their appearance after exposure to media images of thinness (Heinberg & Thompson, 1995; Posovac, Posovac, & Posovac, 1998). The findings are potentially due to the process of negative social comparison, in which females with body image or eating problems demonstrate increased maladjustment and food consumption as a result of exposure to social ideals of female appearance.

1.2. Peer models of dietary restraint

Several studies demonstrate that females consume more food when exposed to a peer model who had eaten a large, rather than small, amount of food (Goldman, Herman, & Polivy, 1991; Nisbett & Storms, 1974; Polivy et al., 1979; Rosenthal & Marx, 1979). There were various issues concerning this line of research, which served as an impetus for the current investigation.

First, it is possible that the observed effects of modeling are due solely to the disinhibiting effects of exposure to a model who consumed a large quantity of food. Rosenthal and Marx (1979) found that the females consumed more food after exposure to a model who ate a large amount of food than to no model (control). Appreciable differences in the amount of food consumed were not found, however, after exposure to a model who consumed a small amount of food than to no model. Although Goldman et al. (1991) included the latter two conditions in their study, the amount of food consumed after exposure was not compared. Research has not yet demonstrated that exposure to a model demonstrating dietary restraint inhibits food consumption.

Second, the research has examined the effects of a peer model's verbalization of dietary restraint on observer's food consumption but only in a very limited fashion (i.e., a single statement of being a dieter; Polivy et al., 1979). Researchers have found that a model's verbalizations are effective in eliciting desired behavior when the model provides an elaborate rationale that complements his or her behavior (e.g., Radke-Yarrow & Zahn-Waxler, 1984). It remains to be demonstrated whether exposure to a model providing an elaborate verbalization of dietary restraint accompanying such behavior would increase the model's effectiveness in promoting dietary restraint.

Third, researchers have not found that individual differences in dietary restraint are moderators of the effects of exposure to peer models on food consumption (see Polivy et al., 1979; Rosenthal & Marx, 1979). Nevertheless, previous research has not focused on the potential effectiveness of dietary restrained models per se. There are three moderators that particularly warrant consideration: dietary restraint, dieting status, and attribution styles. Polivy et al. (1979) proposed that character similarity optimizes the effects of peer models on food consumption. Consequently, it would be expected that females who were high, rather than low, in dietary restraint and current dieters, rather than nondieters, would be inclined to show dietary restraint after exposure to dietary restrained models.

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