

Comparing to perfection: How cultural norms for appearance affect social comparisons and self-image

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Abstract

Theory and research suggests that cultural norms for appearance present unrealistic standards of beauty which may contribute to women's body dissatisfaction. In Study 1, women described their appearance more negatively than men and made more upward social comparisons about their bodies, but not about other domains. Women also compared more than men with unrealistic targets (e.g., models). In Study 2, we explored the role of cultural norms for appearance in social comparisons with relevant (peer) or irrelevant (model) superior targets. When cultural norms were not salient, participants judged a peer to be more relevant, compared more with the peer, and were more negatively affected by the peer. However, when cultural norms were salient, participants judged a professional model to be equally relevant, compared more with the model and felt worse after exposure to the model. We discuss the powerful role of cultural norms in determining social comparison processes and self-appraisals.

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Introduction

It is a well-documented finding that most women feel dissatisfied with their bodies (Smolak, 2006). A Canadian health survey revealed that 85–90% of women dislike their bodies (University of Alberta Health Centre, 2001). Women report lower body satisfaction (Aruguete, Yates, & Edman, 2006), are more likely to diet (Polivy & Herman, 1983), and have higher rates of eating disorders (Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1984) than men do. Even women who know they are not overweight often express a desire to lose weight (Connor-Greene, 1988). In fact, females' dissatisfaction with their bodies is so widespread that some theorists refer to it as a "normative discontent" (Rodin et al., 1984). This dissatisfaction is evident

throughout a woman's life span (Pliner, Chaiken, & Flett, 1990), with girls as young as 9 indicating a desire to lose weight (Schur, Sanders, & Steiner, 2000).

Cultural norms for thinness and beauty

Theorists speculate that cultural norms for thinness and beauty play a large role in women's chronic dissatisfaction with their bodies (Thompson, 1992; Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). They believe that the message that women need to be thin and attractive to be accepted in our society largely comes from the media (Fallon, 1990; Kilbourne, 1994; Wolf, 1991). Indeed, images of thin women are ubiquitous in the media, and women's magazines contain more messages about physical attractiveness than do men's magazines (e.g., Malkin, Wornian, & Chrisler, 1999). Images and messages conveying cultural norms for weight and appearance are pervasive and arguably very salient to women.

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The average American woman is 5'4" tall and weighs 140 pounds, whereas the average American model is 5'11" tall and weighs 117 pounds (National Eating Disorders Association, 2002). Fashion models are thinner than 98% of American women (Smolak, 1996). In addition, the cultural ideal of attractiveness among women has increased in thinness over time (Wiseman, Gray, Mosimann, & Ahrens, 1992), whereas the average weight of North American women has not reflected this trend (Spitzer, Henderson, & Zivian, 1999). Clearly, the standards of physical attractiveness set by models and celebrities are unrealistic for the average woman to strive for.

Although women must fit into a narrowly defined category of physical attractiveness (i.e., young, tall, thin; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2004), the cultural norms for men are more flexible and relaxed. There are many different types of men (with different physical characteristics) that are depicted in the media and that women view as attractive (Humphreys & Paxton, 2004). Consequently, although the "ideal male" may be viewed as muscular and athletic, men may fit a variety of categories and still be accepted and viewed as attractive.

Thompson and his colleagues have developed a sociocultural model which suggests that the extent to which women internalize the largely unattainable societal standards for thinness will have a big impact on their body satisfaction (Thompson, 1992; Thompson et al., 1999). For example, Heinberg and Thompson (1995) found that when women were exposed to thin media images, women high in sociocultural internalization became more depressed and more dissatisfied with their bodies whereas women low in sociocultural internalization did not. In addition, Stice, Mazotti, Weibel, and Agras (2000) had women who were high in internalization of the thin-ideal participate in a dissonance-based intervention in which they voluntarily argued against the value of the thin-ideal in our society. They found that these women internalized the ideal to a lesser degree following the intervention and they also showed increases in body satisfaction and decreases in dieting behavior. In sum, theory and research suggest that sociocultural norms for ideal appearance play an important role in people's, particularly women's, assessments of their bodies.

Positive illusions

The widespread nature of women's negative evaluations of their bodies is particularly striking in the context of research on positive illusions which reveals

an equally widespread tendency for people to perceive their attributes in very positive terms (Baumeister, 1998; Taylor & Brown, 1988). For example, research has shown that the majority of people think that they are above-average drivers (Svenson, 1981), the majority of college professors believe they do above-average work (Cross, 1977) and college students judge their personality traits to be superior to the average college student (Alicke, 1985).

Although people appear to engage in these self-enhancing processes for most domains in life, we argue that for women, the domain of weight and appearance may be an exception to this general rule. If they self-deprecate rather than self-enhance when describing their weight and appearance, this may contribute to their feelings of body dissatisfaction. Other researchers have suggested that women may avoid making self-enhancing descriptions when describing their weight. Powell, Matacin, and Stuart (2001) asked participants to rate their feelings about their own body and rate their feelings about an average student's body. Men rated themselves higher on body-esteem than they rated other men, but women did not exhibit such self-serving evaluations of their bodies. In addition, although participants generally showed a typical self-enhancement tendency to value their good qualities more than their flaws, women failed to self-enhance in this manner when evaluating their weight. This suggests that people's usually robust ability to protect themselves from threat and to feel good about themselves falls apart for women when they evaluate their bodies. We propose that the strong tendency to self-enhance in most domains (e.g., Baumeister, 1998) is countered by the equally strong message, aimed at women, that their physical appearance will never measure up to the high standards set by the media. It may be that cultural norms clearly communicate to women that even if they do not judge themselves by this standard, others will. This message may render the typical strategies for self-flattery ineffective.

Social comparison theory

Not only do women's self-evaluations of their weight and appearance counter the literature on self-enhancement, they are also somewhat out of step with the equally large literature on social comparison theory. First, women's reactions are inconsistent with the literature that suggests that people often prefer downward comparisons with inferior others because they are self-protective or self-enhancing (Gibbons & McCoy, 1991; Wills, 1981; Wood, 1989). For example, Wills

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