



A Longitudinal Study of Appearance-based Rejection Sensitivity and the Peer Appearance Culture



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ABSTRACT

Drawing from theory that implicates the peer appearance culture in shaping adolescents' appearance concerns, we examined whether friends' reports of the appearance culture were associated with increases in emerging adolescents' appearance-based rejection sensitivity (appearance-RS) over six months. Gender and age differences were also assessed. We used peer nominations to identify dyadic friendships ($n = 178$ adolescents/89 dyads, $M_{\text{age}} = 12.0$), and unique friendship networks ($n = 284$, $M_{\text{age}} = 12.0$). Appearance-RS increased more over a 6-month period when adolescents had reciprocated best friends who reported more body change and extreme weight loss behaviours, and when they had a best friend with a higher BMI. This suggests that observable features of friends may be most relevant. Also, however, adolescents showed greater increases in appearance-RS when they belonged to a friendship group that reported higher appearance dissatisfaction, and adolescents showed less increases in appearance-RS when their friends reported more positive appearance self-perceptions.

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A Longitudinal Study of Appearance-based Rejection Sensitivity and the Peer Appearance Culture: The Role of Friends' Body Image, Dieting, and Weight

Physical appearance is a salient and central aspect of the day-to-day functioning of young people, with research demonstrating the importance of physical appearance in relation to self esteem, popularity, peer acceptance, and attractiveness to the opposite sex (Carey, Donaghue, & Broderick, 2011; Mooney, Farley, & Strugnell, 2009; Morin, Maiano, Marsh, Janosz, & Nagengast, 2011). Moreover, adolescents (and increasingly, children) are resorting to potentially problematic weight control behaviours in an attempt to modify the way they look (Gonsalves, Hawk, & Goodenow, 2014; Schur, Sanders, & Steiner, 2000). Worryingly, dieting and other weight management behaviours are thought to undermine the natural regulation of eating (i.e., "intuitive eating"; Moy, Petrie, Dockendorff, Greenleaf, & Martin, 2013), and tend to persist beyond adolescence into adulthood (Neumark-Sztainer, Wall, Larson, Eisenberg, & Loth, 2011).

Given that physical appearance concerns can be so central to adolescents' global self-worth and later positive development, it is not surprising that adolescents also are aware of how appearance can affect their popularity and acceptance, and friends and peers play

important roles in shaping body image attitudes and concerns (Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014). One particular and important aspect of adolescent (and adult) body image and appearance-related concerns that has recently been identified is appearance-based rejection sensitivity (appearance-RS), defined as a cognitive affective processing system, which drives the tendency to anxiously expect, and readily perceive, cues of interpersonal rejection based on the way one looks (Park, 2007).

Appearance-RS shows parallels to more general anxiety-related social constructs, such as social-evaluative fears (Dryman & Heimberg, 2015). For example, there are similarities in terms of preoccupation with others' evaluations of self, expectation of negative evaluation, and interpretation biases. However, there are also key differences, whereby the central focus of appearance-RS is on physical attributes, compared to the potential for social-evaluative fears around diverse aspects of self, including for example, intelligence and personality.

Appearance-RS is also distinct from conceptions of body image, which typically involve comparisons of self to others or to social norms, yet focus on negative thoughts and feelings about the body (Grogan, 2008). While body dissatisfaction tends to covary with body size (Presnell, Bearman, & Stice, 2004), appearance-RS does not (Webb, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Donovan, 2014). Appearance-RS involves negative thoughts and feelings about one's appearance (rather than one's body), and – most notably – appearance-RS explicitly relates these negative thoughts to fears about being accepted or rejected by others. Drawing from the broader construct of rejection sensitivity (from which appearance-RS was derived), a defining feature of

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appearance-RS is the anxiety, hypervigilance, over-reactions and maladaptive responses to ambiguous signs of appearance-based rejection that can bring about or contribute to the social rejection that is so feared (London, Downey, Bonica, & Paltin, 2007; Zimmer-Gembeck & Nesdale, 2013).

Appearance-RS has been shown to be elevated in a substantial proportion of adolescents (Bowker, Thomas, Spencer, & Park, 2013) and young adults (Park, DiRaddo, & Calogero, 2009), and has been found to be linked to symptoms of emotional problems and a range of social difficulties (Park, 2007; Park, Calogero, Young, & DiRaddo, 2010). Despite the knowledge that appearance-RS is detrimental to the health and well-being of adolescents, all of our understanding of why some young people become excessively concerned with social acceptance and rejection based on the way they look has occurred in only the past few years and has been based on cross-sectional research. For example, research by Webb et al. (2014) has shown that elevated appearance-RS is linked with many aspects of appearance-salient peer interactions, such as teasing by peers about appearance, as well as youths' perceived pressure to conform to appearance ideals. However, finding such associations does not provide support for the expected temporal associations of peer influences on increased appearance-RS over time. In addition to the lack of longitudinal research, all but two previous studies (see Bowker et al., 2013; Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2015 for exceptions) have relied on self-report information to measure both perceived social pressures and appearance-RS. Thus, we addressed these limitations of past research by conducting a longitudinal study that allowed us to examine the temporal associations of friends' own reports of their appearance-related concerns and behaviours with emerging adolescents' self-reported appearance-RS over time.

Why Focus on the Peer Appearance Culture among Adolescent Friends?

The tripartite model proposes that three key sociocultural sources of pressure drive the onset and exacerbation of body dissatisfaction (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). In particular, it is theorized that various messages and pressures from parents, peers and the media promote unhealthy attitudes and values about appearance ideals, and contribute to dissatisfaction with one's own appearance (Keery, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004). While there is extensive evidence to support the role of each of these sociocultural sources in relation to body dissatisfaction (e.g., Keery, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004; Tylka, 2011; Van Den Berg, Thompson, Obremski-Brandon, & Coovet, 2002; Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014), and, to a lesser extent, in relation to appearance-RS (e.g., Park et al., 2009; Webb, Zimmer-Gembeck, Waters, Farrell, & Nesdale, submitted for publication), the present study focused in more depth on the friend and peer context in particular. Our rationale for this focus was a recognition that during adolescence intimacy and mutuality within friendships escalate rapidly, and friends become key socialising agents, on par with and eventually surpassing parents in their influence (Collins & Laursen, 2004; Collins & Steinberg, 2006; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). When considering the role of friends and peers in relation to adolescent appearance concerns specifically, Badaly (2013) demonstrated in a meta-analytic review that adolescents tend to show similarity to their peers in appearance concerns and related behaviours, including appearance dissatisfaction, disordered eating, and weight control methods, and concluded that this was likely to be partly due to peer influence, as it was unlikely to be the sole result of cognitive bias or selection of similar friends. Moreover, prospective associations have been reported between perceived appearance-related pressures from peers (such as friends' modelling and appearance conversations) and concerns about appearance in adolescent girls (Helfert & Warschburger, 2011; Jones, 2004), and to a lesser extent in boys (Helfert & Warschburger, 2011). Notably, longitudinal studies are sparse, and findings are less consistent than for cross-sectional studies.

Why would Appearance-RS be an Outcome of the Peer Appearance Culture?

Appearance-RS theory draws together the pervasive human need to belong and be accepted by others with adolescents' (and adults') desire for physical attractiveness and awareness of how important appearance can be for social success. Research suggests that boys and girls more anxiously expect, and readily perceive, cues of interpersonal rejection based on the way they look when they are embedded within an 'appearance culture', where they are exposed to higher levels of appearance teasing, peer pressure to be attractive, and conversations about appearance within the social group (Webb et al., 2014). It is this greater exposure to a peer appearance culture (Jones, 2004) that is expected to account for heightened concerns about appearance-based rejection sometimes directly, but other times via the extent that the individual personally accepts ('internalises') widely-endorsed appearance ideals, and feels dissatisfied with their appearance (Park et al., 2009; Webb et al., 2014). In one previous cross-sectional study (Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2015), for example, adolescents were similar to their best friends and to members of their close friendship group in their appearance-RS. Moreover, appearance-RS was higher in adolescents whose best friends reported higher levels of restrictive dieting and a sense of self worth as dependent on feeling attractive. Appearance-RS was also higher in adolescents whose friendship groups reported higher average levels of restrictive dieting, appearance-dependent self worth, and body dissatisfaction, and had a lower BMI relative to other groups. These findings provided the first support for the theory of the 'peer appearance culture' as a socializing force in appearance-RS. The propensity of one's friends to base their self worth on physical appearance, be dissatisfied with their appearance, and engage in dieting or weight loss behaviours, may provide observable and salient messages about socio-cultural standards of beauty and attractiveness within and outside one's friendships and groups, and thus be linked with greater sensitivity to appearance-based rejection. This view has been supported by qualitative research finding that dieting behaviour by close friends leads adolescent girls to feel that they too ought to be dieting (Wertheim, Paxton, Schutz, & Muir, 1997). Additionally, a friendship group (but not best friend) with a lower BMI may be perceived as threatening, and may provoke concerns about social acceptance and rejection based on one's own appearance. Notably, researchers have advocated for assessing both close friendship ties, as well as broader friendship connections, given the differing socialisation, quality, and mutuality of these diverse relationships, and that some adolescents have a friendship group but not a mutual best friend, and vice versa (Brown, 1989).

Age and Gender

Researchers have noted the declining age at which body image and appearance concerns first emerge, with girls as young as six years reporting a desire for a thinner body (Lowes & Tiggemann, 2003). However, it is during the early years of adolescence that these concerns become more prevalent (Littleton & Ollendick, 2003), and it is from adolescence to emerging adulthood that body dissatisfaction shows a sharp linear increase for girls (Bucchianeri, Arikian, Hannan, Eisenberg, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2013). There are mixed findings regarding the trajectory of body image concerns for boys, with some studies showing increasing dissatisfaction during adolescence (e.g., Bucchianeri et al., 2013) and other studies showing declines (e.g., Bearman, Presnell, Martinez, & Stice, 2006). It is theorized that appearance concerns tend to emerge and reach their peak during adolescence due to a perfect storm of emotional and physical development, and the maturation of interpersonal relationships, including interactions with romantic interests, in conjunction with mounting sociocultural pressures (Piran, 2010; Thompson et al., 1999; Williams & Currie, 2000). For the present study, a sample of emerging adolescents was recruited in order to capture the period of development during which appearance concerns

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