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The associations between body dissatisfaction, body figure, self-esteem, and depressed mood in adolescents in the United States and Korea: A moderated mediation analysis

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ABSTRACT

The perception of one's body image becomes particularly important in adolescence. Body dissatisfaction has been associated with negative psychological functioning, such as self-esteem and depression. Previous findings showed that the decreased self-esteem due to body dissatisfaction explained the association between negative attitude toward body and psychological well-being in different cultural contexts. The present study examined adolescents from the US ($N = 1002$) and Korea ($N = 3993$) and replicated and extended the previous findings regarding body dissatisfaction and associated psychological outcomes. The results showed that body dissatisfaction predicted higher depressed mood and that self-esteem mediated this association for both American and Korean adolescents. Notably, the indirect effect of body dissatisfaction and perceived body image on depressed mood via self-esteem was greater for American adolescents than for Korean adolescents. The implications of the cultural difference in the significance of self-esteem in mediating the body dissatisfaction and depressed mood are discussed.

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Having a negative attitude toward one's body has been linked to a wide array of psychological issues (Cafri et al., 2005; Neumark-Sztainer, Paxton, Hannan, Haines, & Story, 2006). Individuals in much of the world are indeed at risk of feeling negative about their body image regardless of gender. There is a strong cultural norm, particularly in the West, that only women who are slender and delicate are considered beautiful (Freeman, 1975). This ideal of thinness for women in Western cultural contexts comes from a sociocultural perspective that emphasizes the risk of culturally transmitted standards, most notably through the mass media (see Levine & Harrison, 2009 for a review). These norms have become so prevalent in the United States that according to Polivy and Herman (1987), normal eating for women in America is equivalent to the typical activity of dieting. Men are no exception to this modern pressure to have a culturally supported ideal body type (Frederick et al., 2007). In the U.S., the media portrays attractive men as being lean and muscular, which puts men under the

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pressure of achieving an unrealistic body ideal (Cafri et al., 2005; Pope, Phillips, & Olivardia, 2000). In a recent survey of men in the United States, 48% of respondents were indeed dissatisfied with their weight (Holsen, Kraft, & Roysamb, 2001).

Body dissatisfaction may be particularly detrimental to adolescents who are already going through dramatic physical changes (Levine & Smolak, 2002, pp. 74–82; Smolak & Levine, 2001; Stice & Bearman, 2001). It has been reliably determined that body dissatisfaction is a risk factor not only for adolescents' unhealthy dieting behavior (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2006), but also for poor psychological functioning indicated by diminished levels of self-esteem (Murray, Rieger, & Byrne, 2015; van den Berg, Mond, Eisenberg, Ackard, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2011; Wichstrøm & Soest, 2016) and heightened levels of depressed mood (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Johnson & Wardle, 2005; Paxton, Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, & Eisenberg, 2006). Particularly, the recent studies have shown that self-esteem is one of the critical mediators of the link between body dissatisfaction and psychological well-being (Duchesne et al., 2016; Koronczai et al., 2013). Numerous studies have also found that physical self-concept is an important component of self-identity for adolescents, and body dissatisfaction is detrimental to adolescents' self-esteem (Grabe et al., 2008; Keery, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004; van den Berg et al., 2007). Considering that adolescence is a time when individuals begin to develop a coherent sense of their own identity, a positive sense of self-worth is particularly important, even vital (Erikson, 1968), as indicated by the reliably strong association that has been confirmed to connect self-esteem and psychological well-being (Furnham & Cheng, 2000; Çivitci & Çivitci, 2009).

The heightened concerns for one's body image and appearances are not limited to the Western cultural contexts, as some earlier scholars believed due to the lower incidence of eating disorders and lower rates of obesity in non-Western cultural contexts (Lee, Lee, & Chen, 1989; Khandelwal & Saxena, 1990). In fact, South Korea, a country that has gone through a dramatic socio-cultural change and westernization in a short span of time, puts great emphasis on appearance-management in the society (Park & Choi, 2008), and shows alarmingly high levels of body dissatisfaction (Kim & Yoon, 2000; Jung & Lee, 2006; Jung, Forbes, & Lee, 2009). In a recent survey by Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD), South Korea was the most diet-conscious country among thirteen Asian countries (Oh, 2004). A more recent cross-cultural study conducted by Jung and Lee (2006) between American and Korean college women revealed that Korean women were more critical of their appearance and less satisfied with their body compared to their American counterpart. These researchers suggested that Korean women, under the influence of Western media and culture, now strive to meet the Western ideal of thin body figure and that the collective nature of the society may have exacerbated the pressure to conform to this ideal. As in American adolescents, heightened body dissatisfaction was associated with lower levels of self-esteem and higher levels of depression (Kim & Kim, 2001). The present study aims to examine adolescents' attitudes regarding their body image and associated psychological outcomes, while taking cultural contexts into account. Specifically, adolescents living in the United States and in Korea, the two societies where the thin-ideal is dominant but that differ in cultural orientations were examined.

1. Body dissatisfaction and psychological wellbeing in cultural context

The majority of the studies that have examined the link between body dissatisfaction and psychological well-being and the potential mediating role of self-esteem have been done in Western countries, most notably in the United States. There have been only a few studies conducted with Korean adolescents, but even fewer studies that have examined these two cultural contexts at the same time. Despite considerable amount of evidence documenting the differences in the levels of body dissatisfaction (Jung & Lee, 2006; Jung et al., 2009; Lee, Lee, Choi, Kim, & Han, 2014), self-esteem (Farruggia, 2004), and depressed mood (Kwon, Yoon, Joormann, & Kwon, 2013) in the United States and in Korea, these variables were examined in isolation. For instance, Jung and Lee (2006) showed that there is a negative association between body dissatisfaction and self-esteem for both Americans and Koreans, but these authors did not examine the moderating effect of the cultural group. Therefore, we know very little about the relative impact that body dissatisfaction has on one's self-esteem and the subsequent effects of dissatisfaction on psychological distress in different cultural contexts.

Based on the self-concept theories (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, 2003; Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1985), to the extent that one's body image is meaningful to one's identity, a global evaluation of one's self-worth is influenced by beliefs about one's own body image. The few existing pieces of literature on the relative importance of body satisfaction on psychological well-being in different cultural contexts are inconsistent. Some of that research suggests that Caucasians not only report higher body dissatisfaction when compared to the minority in America such as Latinos (Ceballos & Czyniewska, 2010), they are also more susceptible to the negative impact of body dissatisfaction compared to the minority in the United States of African American and Indian American background, (e.g., Story, French, Resnick, & Blum, 1995); however, other studies do not find such a difference (Henrique & Calhoun, 1999). The present study thus sets out to fill this gap in the literature by understanding the role of cultural contexts when explaining the relationships between one's own evaluation of body image and psychological well-being. First, we tested whether the degree to which body dissatisfaction harms one's self-esteem varies for American and Korean adolescents. Although Korean adolescents may be more dissatisfied with their body image than their American counterpart, body dissatisfaction may not be necessarily as detrimental to Korean adolescents' self-esteem as Americans adolescents'. Self-esteem may be determined by multiple factors (Gentile et al., 2009), and the relative importance of body image to one's identity as it relates to other factors may differ depending on one's cultural background. To our knowledge, no study has as yet examined the strengths in the association between body dissatisfaction and self-esteem for American and Korean adolescents simultaneously.

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