



Original article

Predictors of Intuitive Eating in Adolescent Girls



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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: To examine proposed predictors of intuitive eating, including social appearance comparison, and to test a modified acceptance model of intuitive eating in adolescent girls.

Methods: Participants were 400 adolescent girls aged 12–16 years who completed measures of body acceptance by others, self-objectification, social appearance comparison, body appreciation, and intuitive eating.

Results: Correlations showed that all proposed predictors were related to intuitive eating in the expected direction. In particular, social appearance comparison was negatively related to body appreciation and intuitive eating. After controlling for other predictors, social appearance comparison was shown to explain unique variance in intuitive eating. Using structural equation modeling, an integrated modified acceptance model of intuitive eating yielded an overall good fit to the data. Mediation analyses showed that there was a significant indirect effect of body acceptance by others on both body appreciation and intuitive eating through social appearance comparison and self-objectification.

Conclusions: The findings extend the acceptance model of intuitive eating to adolescent girls but also identify social comparison as an important mechanism in this process. Practically, the findings highlight several areas that may be targeted to foster adaptive eating patterns in girls.

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IMPLICATIONS AND
CONTRIBUTION

This study found that predictors of intuitive (or adaptive) eating established for women also apply to adolescent girls. In addition, girls' social appearance comparison was associated with lower levels of intuitive eating. These findings offer several targets for interventions that attempt to increase adaptive eating in adolescent girls.

Research investigating eating behavior has strongly focused on eating pathology and has been less concerned with identifying predictors of adaptive eating [1]. A similar trend is evident in the body image field with the bulk of previous research centered on negative body image and body dissatisfaction [2]. Recently, however, there has been an increase in examinations of adaptive eating and positive body image. In particular, studies have examined intuitive eating [1,3] as a measure of adaptive eating and body appreciation as an index of positive body image [4].

Intuitive eating reflects a strong trust and connection with the internal hunger and satiety cues that signal when and how much to eat [1,3]. As opposed to restrained eating, intuitive eating occurs in response to internal cues and not in response to difficult

emotions or distress. Those who eat intuitively are not preoccupied with dieting and food, do not categorize food as “forbidden,” and food choices are a reflection of preferred taste and a desire to assist the body's functioning. In support of this conceptualization of intuitive eating, studies have shown that individuals who eat in response to internal hunger and satiety cues engage in less overeating in the absence of hunger [5], less eating in response to emotional or situational triggers [6], and less food preoccupation [7].

Correlational studies have reported significant associations between intuitive eating and women's health and psychological well-being. Intuitive eating has been shown to be negatively related to disordered eating symptomatology and positively associated with optimism, life satisfaction, proactive coping, and self-esteem in young adult women [1]. Experimental studies of intuitive eating intervention programs have also reported beneficial outcomes for psychological and physical well-being

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[8], for example, improved body satisfaction [9], self-acceptance, blood pressure [10], and increased physical activity [11]. Importantly, intuitive eating is not associated with increased body mass index (BMI) but rather with no weight change [11] or with weight loss [9].

Thus far, research on intuitive eating has mainly sampled adult women. Yet examining intuitive eating in adolescent girls is imperative, because of the focus on appearance, weight control, and high rate of eating pathology [12] during this developmental period. Adolescence is also the time when attitudes and behaviors regarding eating develop and can have negative impacts into young adulthood [13]. To our knowledge, there are only two published studies examining intuitive eating in adolescence. The first found that intuitive eating negatively related to dieting pressure and negative emotions (e.g., sadness) and positively related to life and body satisfaction and positive emotions (e.g., confidence) [14]. In the second study, dieting for weight management was negatively related to intuitive eating [15].

Drawing on Humanistic Theory [16] and Objectification Theory [17], Avalos and Tylka [18] developed a model of intuitive eating in adult women, termed “the acceptance model of intuitive eating.” This model was first examined in college women [18] and subsequently in female college athletes [19] and emerging, early- and middle-aged adult women [20]. The model posits that body acceptance by others assists women to resist self-objectification. Self-objectification occurs when women internalize an observer’s perspective of themselves as an object to be evaluated and is characterized by habitual appearance monitoring [17]. Women who resist self-objectification are proposed to have higher levels of body appreciation, which refers to the acceptance of, favorable opinions toward, and respect for the body, irrespective of perceived flaws [4]. Body appreciation is conceptualized as the proximal predictor of intuitive eating because women who appreciate their bodies are more aware of bodily needs and so respect their bodies by eating according to internal cues [18].

In the acceptance model of intuitive eating, perceived body acceptance is postulated to indirectly lead to body appreciation, via reduced self-objectification [18]. People who perceive that others are accepting of their bodies are proposed to feel less need to self-objectify by habitually monitoring their appearance [18]. Women who resist self-objectification should appreciate their own body to a greater extent, regardless of perceived flaws. Self-objectification is also suggested to directly lead to intuitive eating. Objectification theory [17] posits that women who do not focus on their external appearance have more resources available

to attend to internal bodily experiences (e.g., hunger and satiety cues) and so should eat more intuitively [18].

It seems likely that the predictors contained within the acceptance model will also predict intuitive eating in adolescent girls. It is particularly necessary to explore predictors and mechanisms that influence intuitive eating in adolescence, while eating attitudes and behaviors are still forming, as this may reveal appropriate intervention points to enhance adaptive eating [14]. In addition to those predictors outlined in the acceptance model of intuitive eating, one factor likely to be especially important for adolescent girls is social appearance comparison.

Social comparison theory postulates that people compare their own qualities with other people’s qualities to obtain information for self-evaluation [21]. In a recent meta-analysis, social comparison in the appearance domain was shown to be a strong predictor of body dissatisfaction [22] and has been reported to be associated with body dissatisfaction in adolescent girls in particular [23,24]. Direction and target of comparison have been shown to impact body image. Upward appearance comparison (e.g., to someone more physically attractive) is related to lower appearance evaluation, whereas downward appearance comparison predicts higher appearance evaluation [25], with adolescents’ target of comparison more frequently peers than models [26]. Girls’ social appearance comparison has also been shown to relate to maladaptive eating indicators, such as extreme weight loss behavior and binge eating [27]. Thus, social appearance comparison was proposed as an additional mediator in the acceptance model. It was reasoned that girls who receive body acceptance from family and friends will not only self-objectify less but will also have less need to evaluate and compare their appearance with others. In sum, they are more likely to accept their bodies as they are and experience higher body appreciation and intuitive eating.

Taken together, the main aim of the present study was to examine whether the predictors (body acceptance by others, self-objectification, and body appreciation) contained within the acceptance model of intuitive eating [18] predict intuitive eating in girls. In addition, social appearance comparison was examined as a potentially useful addition to the acceptance model. The modified acceptance model, as outlined in Figure 1, proposes that perceived body acceptance will be associated with reduced self-objectification and reduced social appearance comparison. In turn, reduced self-objectification and social appearance comparison are expected to be associated with both increased body appreciation and intuitive eating.

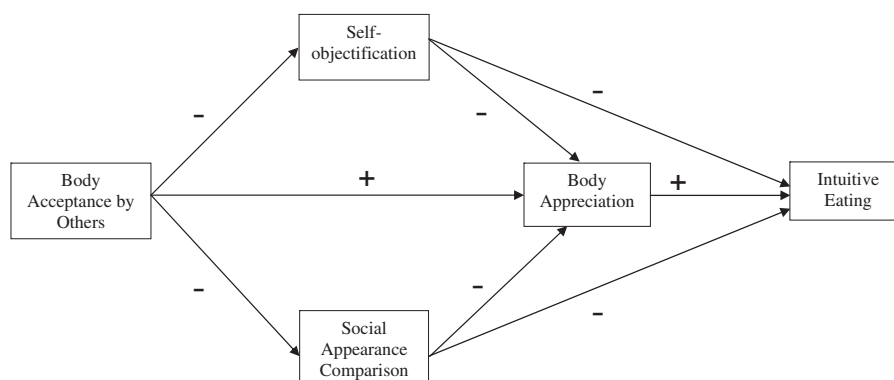


Figure 1. Hypothesized modified acceptance model of intuitive eating for adolescent girls.

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