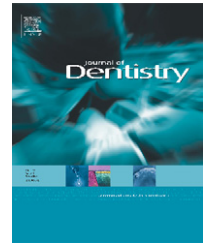


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# The impact of idealised facial images on satisfaction with facial appearance: Comparing ‘ideal’ and ‘average’ faces

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## ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** Recent work has demonstrated that female orthognathic patients display more dissatisfaction with their facial appearance after viewing idealised images of facial photographs, than do controls. Patients may request orthognathic surgery because they hope to improve their appearance to conform with ideals portrayed in the mass media, and these hopes may not be realistic. Patients who demonstrate certain personality traits are more likely to hold such hopes. The current study sought to identify the role of dental status (orthognathic patient versus control), personality traits and media images in dissatisfaction with facial appearance.

**Methods:** Female patients and controls completed a bank of personality measures and then gave repeated measures of satisfaction with their facial appearance after viewing images of ‘ideal’ and ‘average’ women.

**Results:** Neither group showed any change in satisfaction with appearance after viewing either set of images. Patients showed lower satisfaction with facial appearance than controls, but did not differ on other personality measures.

**Conclusions:** Viewing ‘ideal’ images of other women has no significant impact on satisfaction with appearance compared to viewing images of ‘average’ women. These results may help inform the development of a psycho-educational intervention to protect women against the negative effects of viewing idealised images in the media.

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The way we look has been important in human social interaction since ancient times and there is evidence of the importance of physical appearance from a rich variety of sources.<sup>1</sup> It has been demonstrated that there is agreement about what is regarded as attractive across cultures, genders, and age groups,<sup>2</sup> and that beautiful individuals are assumed to

possess a host of favourable personality traits.<sup>3,4</sup> The face is a key feature in the determination of human physical attractiveness,<sup>5</sup> and within the face dental appearance has a considerable impact on how others view us. For example, early research indicated that dental appearance was important to the public in terms of how they spent their money<sup>6</sup> and

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how suitable they regarded others for prestigious occupations.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the mouth was found to be the most important individual feature in terms of assessing overall facial attractiveness,<sup>8,9</sup> though a recent study<sup>10</sup> reported that no single facial feature was especially important in overall attractiveness. Roberts-Harry et al.<sup>11</sup> found that children with cleft palate or lip were still considered less attractive than children without cleft palate or lip, even after the cleft had been repaired.

People who are disfigured may be subject to teasing and staring,<sup>12</sup> and an unusual dental appearance may lead to teasing that is especially hurtful.<sup>13</sup> It should come as no surprise then that improvement in physical appearance is a major motivation for orthodontic treatment and orthognathic surgery.<sup>14-18</sup>

However, while it may be understandable that people will try to attain higher standards of physical attractiveness, at a time where mass media is omnipresent, media ideals of physical attractiveness may serve as an unrealistic point of comparison. Psychological research into body satisfaction has suggested that mass media standards of attractiveness can exacerbate body dissatisfaction<sup>19-23</sup> and disordered eating attitudes<sup>24</sup> in the viewer.

Festinger's<sup>25</sup> social comparison theory postulates that people have an innate tendency to compare themselves with others, and that they tend to compare themselves to similar others. When they compare themselves to others who are far superior it can cause feelings of failure and inadequacy. Richins<sup>22</sup> demonstrated that women do indeed compare their appearance with that of professional models and that this increases the dissatisfaction they feel with their own appearance. Richins considered both facial and body appearance, and whilst the reduction was only found in facial satisfaction, she felt that there may have been a floor effect with body satisfaction whereby the women could not have a significantly lower satisfaction with their body appearance after viewing the images than they did before they viewed them.

A recent paper by Strahan et al.<sup>26</sup> also found that women are both more likely to compare their appearance to unrealistic others such as professional models and that they had lower satisfaction with their body appearance than men. In a second study they studied the degree to which an individual's salience of the societal norm has an impact on how likely they were to compare themselves to other people. They found prompting participants to think of the societal norm made it more likely that they would compare themselves to unrealistic others, such as professional models. Therefore, it seems that mass media portrayals of women are likely to lead to women comparing themselves with unrealistic standards and subsequently feeling dissatisfied with their appearance.

Certain groups of individuals may be particularly vulnerable to the impact of idealised media images due to an increase in self-monitoring. For example adolescents,<sup>27</sup> pregnant women,<sup>28</sup> and people with eating disorders<sup>29</sup> have been shown to have heightened self-monitoring and sensitivity to their appearance. Individuals who possess certain personality traits, such as an increased tendency to compare their appearance to others and to internalise the societal ideal

of beauty as their standard, or who show characteristics associated with eating disorders, may also be more vulnerable to reduced body satisfaction after viewing such images.<sup>20,21</sup> In the case of pregnant women and adolescents, increased self-monitoring of appearance is likely to be caused by the changes that their bodies are undergoing. In the case of those with eating disorders it may be that they possess a personality type that causes them to fixate on their appearance and this leads them to develop an eating disorder. So whether the fixation on appearance is caused by an objective, physical source (altered appearance) or by an internal, perceived source (personality type), it can lead to increased dissatisfaction with appearance.

A study by Newton and Minhas<sup>30</sup> has demonstrated that female orthognathic patients display more dissatisfaction with their facial appearance after viewing idealised images of facial photographs, than do female non-patients. Since the desire to improve their appearance is a major motivation for electing to undergo orthognathic surgery this is not a surprise.<sup>14,15,17,18</sup> The impact of celebrities and models portrayed in the media on the patients' requests for treatment cannot be discounted. Orthodontists have noted that demands for orthodontic treatment are increasingly linked to the patients desire to look like prominent celebrities.<sup>31</sup>

The current study sought to replicate the findings of Newton and Minhas<sup>30</sup> and to further their work by identifying personality traits that predicted increased dissatisfaction with facial appearance caused by exposure to media images. In addition to this, it measured the impact of comparing oneself to others who were not 'ideal' in appearance, but 'average'. This is of interest since it will help determine if the aesthetic comparisons that are motivating orthognathic patients to undergo surgery are relevant (e.g. peer) or unrealistic (e.g. professional model). It is hypothesised that viewing 'idealised' facial images will have a greater negative impact on facial satisfaction than viewing 'average' facial images, and that this effect will be greatest in those who have greater awareness of societal norms of appearance, and those who are seeking orthognathic treatment.

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## 1. Method

Ethical approval was obtained for this study from both the King's College London Hospital Trust and Guy's and St. Thomas's Hospital Trust research ethics committees.

### 1.1. Participants

The participants were women drawn from one of two categories:

- (i) Thirty patients who were undergoing, or had recently completed orthognathic treatment at the orthodontic department of King's College London Hospital Trust and Guy's and St. Thomas's Hospital Trust, and
- (ii) Thirty volunteers who were not orthognathic patients recruited by the use of a mass e-mail to King's College London students and employees (excluding dentists and dental students).

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