



The relation of physical appearance perfectionism with body dissatisfaction among school students 9–18 years of age



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ABSTRACT

Physical appearance perfectionism is a domain-specific form of perfectionism comprising two components: worry about imperfection and hope for perfection (Yang & Stoeber, 2012). Previous studies found that physical appearance perfectionism is related to body dissatisfaction among university students, particularly the worry about imperfection component, but did not address the question of whether physical appearance perfectionism changes over school years and explains variance in body dissatisfaction above age and body mass index (BMI). The present study investigated the questions examining 914 school students 9–18 years of age. Physical appearance perfectionism increases over school years and it explained a significant additional variance in body dissatisfaction beyond age group and BMI. Some gender differences were identified and limitations and implications were discussed.

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1. Introduction

Today's children live in a society in which perfect physical appearance is highly valued. They grow up with pictures of “perfect” looking people and are indoctrinated by peers, friends, family members and media with ideas that perfect looks symbolize success, happiness, and being loved and admired by others. They suffer from the pressures from society for them to conform to the sociocultural ideal for males and females. Consequently, many children strive to look perfect, and feel dissatisfied with their physical appearance (Wang, Lyu, Chen, Wu, & Xiao, 2016; Xu et al., 2010). Because there is no study about physical appearance perfectionism for children and adolescents, the present study aimed to examine the relation of physical appearance perfectionism with body dissatisfaction among school students.

1.1. Perfectionism and physical appearance among children and adolescents

Perfectionism is a multidimensional personality disposition characterized by striving for flawlessness and setting exceedingly high standards of performance accompanied by concern over mistakes and fear of negative evaluations (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Factor analyses comparing measures of multidimensional perfectionism found two superordinate factors of perfectionism that are referred to as perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic

concerns (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Perfectionistic strivings capture perfectionists' exceedingly high standards of performance and striving for perfection. In contrast, perfectionistic concerns capture perfectionists' concern over mistakes and fear of negative evaluations.

In the past decades, a number of studies have pointed to the associations between maladaptive concerns and body satisfactions. For example, Hewitt, Flett, and Ediger (1995) found that socially prescribed perfectionism in young women was associated with higher levels of body-image dissatisfaction and avoidance of social situations where weight and appearance may be a focus. Grammas and Schwartz (2009) found that socially prescribed perfectionism in male undergraduates was associated with higher levels of body dissatisfaction regarding muscularity, body fat, and height. Some recent studies replicated the association pattern between maladaptive perfectionism and body dissatisfaction in pregnant women (Sweeney & Fingerhut, 2013), female undergraduate students (Donovan, Chew, & Penny, 2014) and adolescent girls (Boone, Soenens, & Luyten, 2014). The studies also found that there was a significant positive association between perfectionism and purging when body dissatisfaction was high (Donovan et al., 2014), and that girls high on both perfectionism and body dissatisfaction exhibited the highest levels of eating disorder symptoms (Boone et al., 2014).

All these studies investigated general perfectionism which is defined as a general disposition affecting people across various domains of life (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). However, an important finding in research on perfectionism is that perfectionism is often domain-specific (Dunn, Gotwals, & Causgrove Dunn, 2005; McArdle, 2010; Stoeber & Stoeber, 2009) and that domain-specific measures of perfectionism may be better predictors of domain-specific processes and outcomes than general

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measures of perfectionism (e.g., Dunn, Craft, Causgrove Dunn, & Gotwals, 2011). Consequently, researchers have begun to use domain-specific measures of multidimensional perfectionism when examining how perfectionism relates to specific domains of peoples' lives such as sport, parenting, sexuality, and morality (Dunn et al., 2006; Snell, Overbey, & Brewer, 2005; Stoeber, Harvey, Almeida, & Lyons, 2013; Yang, Stoeber, & Wang, 2015).

1.2. Physical appearance perfectionism

Physical appearance is one of the important domains in which people have perfectionistic tendencies (Stoeber & Stoeber, 2009; Zhang, Yang, & Zhao, 2007). To explore individual differences in perfectionism related to physical appearance, Yang and Stoeber (2012) introduced the concept of physical appearance perfectionism and developed the Physical Appearance Perfectionism Scale (PAPS) using both Chinese and British university students as subjects. The PAPS comprises two factors: worry about imperfection and hope for perfection. The two factors showed differential relationships with perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns such that worry about imperfection showed stronger associations with perfectionistic concerns and hope for perfection showed stronger associations with perfectionistic strivings. Moreover, when the overlap between the two components was controlled for, worry about imperfection continued to show positive correlations with body image disturbances, body weight control behaviors, and body image concerns, and negative correlations with physical appearance self-esteem and body areas satisfaction; whereas most of the correlations of hope for perfection became nonsignificant. Additionally, physical appearance perfectionism did not show gender difference.

Recently, Shang and Yang (2013, 2014) found that worry about imperfection negatively associated with body satisfaction and appearance self-esteem, and positively associated with social appearance anxiety and appearance stress among cosmetic surgery patients. Stoeber and Yang (2015) found that for both Chinese and British female college students, worry about imperfection positively associated with eating disorder symptoms beyond general perfectionism.

1.3. The present study

Previous findings provide preliminary evidence of the importance of physical appearance perfectionism for appearance concerns including body dissatisfaction. These studies, however, used only adult subjects. In this study, we examined the relation of physical appearance perfectionism with body dissatisfaction among school students. We also examined the age group and gender differences of physical appearance perfectionism and body dissatisfaction. Because this is the first study of physical appearance perfectionism among school students, we examined the factor structure of the Physical Appearance Perfectionism Scale.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 914 students (420 boys and 494 girls) from schools in the eastern coastal region of the People's Republic of China. All of them completed paper-and-pencil versions of all measures in Chinese. There were 270 preadolescents (9–12 years, 126 boys, 144 girls), 311 early adolescents (13–15 years, 161 boys, 150 girls), and 333 later adolescents (16–18 years, 133 boys, 200 girls). Mean age of participants was 14.0 years ($SD = 2.3$; range = 9–18 years).

To recruit the participants, we first contacted the principals of 6 schools (i.e., 2 primary schools, 2 junior high schools and 2 senior high schools) and got approved for this study. Then we randomly selected one class for each grade in every school for survey except that grade 1 to grade 3 in primary schools was not included. Finally, we went to

the classes one by one with class tutors, asking students to finish the questionnaire.

2.2. Measures

To measure physical appearance perfectionism, we used the Physical Appearance Perfectionism Scale (PAPS; Yang & Stoeber, 2012; Chinese version) capturing worry about imperfection (7 items; e.g., "I worry that my appearance is not good enough") and hope for perfection (5 items; e.g., "I hope my body shape is perfect"). In this study, the Cronbach's alphas for the whole scale, worry about imperfection and hope for perfection were 0.78, 0.78 and 0.85 respectively. The correlation between worry about imperfection and hope for perfection was 0.24 ($p < 0.001$). Because all of the items displayed significant deviation from normality (Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z ranged from 5.43 to 7.54, $p < 0.001$), we used robust maximum likelihood (MLM) estimation which provides robust parameter and model fit estimates for data that deviate from normality (Brown, 2006). We examined the first order two-factor model using LISREL 8.70 (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 2005), with factors allowed to covary. The results indicated adequate fit for this model, CFI = 0.96, NNFI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.065 (0.057–0.073), SRMR = 0.071.

To measure body dissatisfaction, we borrowed the methodology of Mulasi-Pokhriyal and Smith (2010). Thus we used an eight-figure, gender-specific silhouette drawing instrument, with figure 1 being the thinnest and figure 8 being the heaviest (Fig. 1). Previous research has indicated strong test-retest reliability after using such an instrument among children and adolescents (Collins, 1991; Thompson & Altabe, 1991). Silhouette questions pertaining to body image were (a) circle the boy/girl that looks like you now (perceived body) and (b) circle the boy/girl you want to look like (ideal body). Students were asked to circle one silhouette per question.

To measure body satisfaction, six questions pertaining to body image developed by Mulasi-Pokhriyal and Smith (2010) were used and were evaluated using a 5-point (strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), unsure (3), agree (4), strongly agree (5)) psychometric Likert scale. Questions were: (a) I would like to lose weight, (b) I would like to gain weight, (c) my weight is just right, (d) I would like to be taller, (e) I would like to be shorter, and (f) my height is just right. The Chinese translation was achieved following the guidelines for crosscultural translation of instruments (Brislin, 1970): First, three authors translated the original measure from English into Chinese; then three other authors, independently from the first three, translated it back to English; finally discrepancies were discussed in a conference (involving all the seven authors) and the final translation was agreed.

We also asked participants to self-report their weight and height which was used to calculate their body mass index (BMI). The BMI is the most widely used measure of body size accounting for height, and BMIs calculated from self-reported weight/height have shown high correlations ($r_s > 0.90$) with BMIs from objective measurements (e.g., Lombardo, Cuzzolaro, Vetrone, Mallia, & Violani, 2011).

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics, gender and age group differences

We computed means and standard deviations, and examined gender and age group differences for all the measures (see Table 1). The results showed no significant gender differences for worry about imperfection, hope for perfection, Body Dissatisfaction, Weight Is Just Right and Height Is Just Right. However, boys scored higher than girls on Like To Gain Weight, and Like To Be Taller, whereas girls scored higher than boys on Like To Lose Weight, and Like To Be Shorter.

Three age groups differed on worry about imperfection, hope for perfection, Like To Gain Weight, Like To Lose Weight, and Weight Is Just Right. Early and late adolescents scored higher than preadolescents on worry about imperfection, $F(2, 914) = 6.19$, $p < 0.01$. Late

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