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Body image and peer relationships: Unique associations of adolescents' social status and competence with peer- and self-reported appearance victimization



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ABSTRACT

Adolescents were asked to nominate peers who experience appearance-related victimization or engage in appearance-related aggression, in order to examine the peer social status and competency correlates of receiving more nominations. Moreover, the correlates of peer-report vs. self-report appearance-related victimization were considered. Participants were 371 young Australian adolescents (55% girls, $M_{\text{age}} = 12.0$ years) who completed surveys. Results showed that victimized adolescents were rated as less liked, prosocial, popular and good-looking, and perceived themselves to be less attractive, less competent at sport and more teased by peers about appearance. Aggressive adolescents were rated as more popular and better looking, but also less prosocial. Aggressive adolescents also perceived themselves to be less academically but more romantically competent, and reported more appearance anxiety symptoms. Findings from peer-report measures generally support previous research findings using self-report measures, but the significant correlates did appear to differ between peer- and self-report of appearance victimization.

It is widely accepted that peer relationships and interactions have both positive and negative influences on adolescents, and this influence extends to adolescents' body image and other appearance-related beliefs and concerns (Lunde & Frisén, 2011; Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014). In particular, adolescents who report more experiences of teasing and victimization related to their appearance also report more body image concerns and appearance anxiety (sometimes referred to as body dysmorphic symptoms; Mastro, Zimmer-Gembeck, Webb, Farrell, & Waters, 2016; Voelker, Reel, & Greenleaf, 2015). In a meta-analysis of 51 effect sizes, a moderate effect size was found for the association between self-reported weight-related teasing and body dissatisfaction (0.39; Menzel et al., 2010). Thus, when adolescents themselves report appearance-related teasing and body image concerns and symptoms, teasing or victimization by peers is associated with elevated body-related dissatisfaction (Menzel et al., 2010), as well as more eating disorder symptoms (Benas & Gibb, 2008).

Although victimization by peers has been repeatedly implicated in the development of body image problems and eating disorders, it is not possible to rule out that the cognitive biases and beliefs associated with the perception of victimization and negative views of the self may be possible explanations for the strength of these findings. One way to address this possibility would be to capture reports of appearance-related victimization from other sources, rather than using self-report. Such a measurement strategy has rarely been used in past research. We could locate only one previous study on appearance-related concerns that had gathered reports about peer teasing or victimization (either related or not related to appearance or weight) using a measurement method other than self-report. In

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this previous study (Webb, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Mastro, 2016), general (i.e., not appearance-related) relational victimization was examined, which was defined as being the victim of attempts or threats of harm toward one's peer relationships (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995) and was assessed by gathering peer nominations of classmates who are gossiped about, excluded and ostracized. Relational victimization was found to predict adolescents' increasing appearance anxiety symptoms over a 12-month period (referred to as body dysmorphic symptoms in this previous study; Webb et al., 2016). In the present study, we use a similar approach, but applied it in a novel way to gather peers' (i.e., classmates in the same grade) reports of who experienced appearance-related victimization and engaged in appearance-related aggression. We developed this domain-specific approach to assessing victimization and aggression in order to investigate its links with appearance anxiety and peer social status, but to also allow future research on understanding whether victimization related to appearance is important for both appearance-related deficits in functioning and more general types of functional difficulties, such as depression and anxiety. For example, being the victim of ostracism or physical abuse by classmates might be more strongly predictive of general mental health problems, whereas appearance-related victimization could better account for the emergence of appearance-related disorders than does general victimization.

We also had three other aims in the present study. First, consistent with the previous notions of associations between appearance-related victimization and appearance-related disorders, we examined the association of peer-reported appearance victimization and aggression with appearance anxiety symptoms and perceived peer teasing about appearance. We hypothesized that peer-reported appearance victimization and aggression would each be associated with greater appearance anxiety symptoms and more perceived peer teasing about appearance.

Second, we examined the predictors of who tends to be identified by peers as someone who gets victimized due to their appearance or who aggresses against others because of their appearance. For predictors, we focused on peer social status, physical attractiveness, and adolescents' perceptions of their competence (sport, academic, and romantic), given that peer status, attractiveness and self-competence are known to help explain adolescents' general victimization and aggressive behavior (Harel-Fisch et al., 2011). For example, low status with peers and poor self-regard have been found to be relevant for predicting who is at greater risk of victimization by their peers (e.g., Crawford & Manassis, 2011; Zimmer-Gembeck, 2016). In addition, high peer status has been associated with elevated aggressive behavior, most often when the aggression is verbal or targeted at damaging others' relationships (i.e., relational aggression; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), rather than physical (Peeters, Cillessen, & Scholte, 2010; Zimmer-Gembeck, Nesdale et al., 2013). Thus, we hypothesized that popularity, attractiveness, and high competence in domains of sport and romance would be associated with less appearance-related victimization. We also expected that popularity would be associated with more appearance-related aggressive behavior.

Our third study aim was to test the same correlates in a model of self-perceived teasing about appearance to compare the findings between peer-report and self-report measures. We anticipated associations would be similar to those described for the second study aim, but expected self-report measures of competence to be more strongly correlated with self-perceived appearance teasing compared to peer-reported appearance victimization.

Finally, we compared the experiences and reports of boys and girls, and investigated whether there were gender differences in the associations of peer status, attractiveness, and adolescents' perceptions of their competence with peer-report appearance-related aggression and victimization, and self-perceived teasing by peers (i.e., whether gender was a moderator). Boys and girls are often found to differ in their appearance concerns, with girls reporting more concerns than boys (Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014). Also, the specific aggressive behaviors that are enacted by girls and boys are sometimes found to differ (Pronk & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2010; Zimmer-Gembeck, Geiger, & Crick, 2005), although it is unclear whether appearance-related victimization or aggression would differ between girls and boys.

Regarding differences in associations of the proposed correlates of peer-report appearance aggression and victimization, and self-perceived teasing by peers, there are reasons to expect that some associations might differ between girls and boys (Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014). Social psychological and developmental research (e.g., Ramsey & Langlois, 2002; Vannatta, Gartstein, Zeller, & Noll, 2009) would suggest that both boys and girls who are more popular with peers and who are perceived to be more physically attractiveness would be expected to receive preferential treatment. Girls' peer status and integration in the peer group seems to be more dependent on appearance than boys' peer status (Vannatta et al., 2009; Weisfeld, Block, & Ivers, 1983, 1984), and this focus on appearance might co-occur with more appearance-related aggression and victimization among more popular and attractive girls relative to other girls. This pattern could be less apparent in boys. These findings suggest that the associations of popularity and attractiveness with peer-report appearance-related aggression and victimization and self-perceived teasing by peers would be stronger in girls than boys. In contrast, for boys, sport competence may be more relevant than it is for girls, with sport competence more protective against appearance-related victimization than it is for girls. This may occur because boys in sport could have other attributes highly desirable to their peers, such as leadership (Farmer, Estell, Bishop, O'Neal, & Cairns, 2003), which results in less victimization than may occur for other boys. The protection from victimization that may come from sport competence may not be as strong among girls in sport. In support of this, in a study of youth in grades 2 to 10, Vannatta et al. (2009) reported that attractiveness and athleticism were linked to more positive peer status and better integration into the peer group (i.e., less isolation) for boys and girls. Yet, the positive association between athleticism and leadership was stronger for boys than girls and the negative association between physical attractiveness and isolation was significantly stronger among girls compared to boys.

In opposition to these notions, researchers have also reported no significant gender moderation in studies of peer relations and body dissatisfaction or appearance-related problems. In one recent study (de Vries, Peter, de Graaf, & Nikken, 2016), peer appearance-related feedback via social network sites was related to increased body dissatisfaction 18-months later, with no significant

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