



A diary study of appearance social comparisons and need frustration in young women



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to examine the effects of state upward appearance comparisons and psychological need frustration on appearance self-conscious emotions, and compensatory dieting and exercise thoughts and behaviours. An Ecological Momentary Assessment design was employed with young women ($n = 126$; $M_{age} = 21.26$; $SD = 2.76$) who responded to surveys 3 times daily every other day for 1 week. Outcome measures included body and appearance self-conscious emotions (shame, guilt, and authentic and hubristic pride) and (thoughts of) dietary restriction and exercise. Mixed linear modelling showed that upward appearance comparisons and psychological need frustration independently predicted several maladaptive appearance-based emotions and behaviours. For thoughts of dietary restriction, an interaction emerged, whereby thoughts of dietary restriction were intensified in situations when participants engaged in upward appearance comparisons and reported high levels of need frustration. The findings suggest that not only upward appearance comparisons but also high levels of state need frustration can make women more vulnerable to self-conscious emotions and compensatory dieting and exercise thoughts and behaviours.

1. Introduction

Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory (SCT) has been used as a framework to understand how individuals form judgments about their appearance (Corning, Krumm, & Smitham, 2006). According to Festinger, in judging the adequacy of their own pertinent attributes, individuals may engage in three different types of comparisons. Upward social comparisons refer to individuals comparing themselves to someone who they perceive to be superior on a specific attribute. Downward comparisons refer to situations in which individuals perceive themselves to be superior to the comparison target. Finally, lateral comparisons refer to situations in which the individual judges herself to be similar to the target person.

In the appearance domain, results of empirical studies have shown that upward appearance comparisons are consistently associated with negative body image outcomes, including body dissatisfaction, because engaging in such comparisons highlights perceived physical appearance inadequacies (Leahey, Crowther, & Mickelson, 2007). SCT asserts that if an individual is dissatisfied with their appearance, behaviour will be

directed at minimising existing discrepancies (Corning et al., 2006). This may entail adopting health-threatening compensatory weight control behaviours. Indeed, the tendency to engage in upward comparisons has been found to predict eating pathology in college-aged females (e.g., Arigo, Schumacher, & Martin, 2014).

1.1. Self-conscious emotions

Research on appearance comparisons to date has mainly focused on its consequences for body dissatisfaction and compensatory behaviours, while far less attention has been afforded to pertinent emotional body-image outcomes. The self-conscious emotions of shame, guilt, and pride are important in the regulation of cognitions, feelings and behaviours, and are relevant to the appearance domain (e.g., Tangney & Tracy, 2012). Body shame has been associated with social physique anxiety (Thompson, Dinnel, & Dill, 2003), disordered eating (Gupta, Rosenthal, Mancini, Cheavens, & Lynch, 2008) and other negative outcomes (e.g., Lamont, 2015). Guilt can be evoked through negative behaviours, such as overeating or not exercising. While it is a negative emotional

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response, if it is not accompanied by shame, it can lead to ‘reparative’ behaviours (e.g., engaging in healthy behaviours following lapses; Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996). Finally, appearance-related pride can arise as a result of feeling that one exhibits positive appearance characteristics, such as a lean fit body (Tracy & Robins, 2007). Pride may be authentic or hubristic in orientation. Authentic pride may emanate from engagement in specific behavioural acts, such as eating healthily. In contrast, hubristic pride denotes feelings of superiority over others, such as having a more attractive body compared to peers (Castonguay, Gilchrist, Mack, & Sabiston, 2013). Both types of pride have been associated with positive outcomes including self-esteem, low levels of depressive symptoms, and high positive/low negative affect (Castonguay, Sabiston, Croker, & Mack, 2014).

As all these emotions are socially motivated (Tangney & Salovey, 2010), they are highly relevant outcomes to examine when studying appearance comparisons. Hence, in the present study, we contributed to the appearance comparisons literature by considering not only compensatory weight control behaviours and cognitions, but also emotional consequences of upward appearance comparisons.

1.2. Ecological momentary assessment

Most studies to date on social comparisons and body image outcomes have used cross-sectional survey (e.g., Lindner, Tantleff-Dunn, & Jentsch, 2012), or laboratory methods (e.g., Homan, McHugh, Wells, Watson, & King, 2012). In cross-sectional survey studies, researchers typically examine associations between *tendencies* of individuals to compare themselves with others and body image outcomes measured once. This approach fails to consider appearance comparisons as a *state* that fluctuates over time. In laboratory settings the comparison target is chosen by the researchers and hence ecological validity can be compromised. However, in real world settings, individuals ‘choose’ their own comparison targets, and the same individual may vary in the extent to which she engages in upward appearance comparisons across different situations. Ecological Momentary Assessment (EMA) techniques can address this limitation because they enable an exploration of changes in momentary states and behaviours as a result of engaging in self-chosen appearance comparisons. They also allow for a naturalistic unobtrusive assessment of experiences assessed in daily life and reduce reliance on retrospective memory recall (Shiffman, Stone, & Hufford, 2008).

Leahey, Crowther, and Giesla (2011) are among the few researchers to date who have explored associations between appearance comparisons and body image related outcomes using EMA. Specifically, these authors examined how naturally occurring upward appearance comparisons predicted negative cognitions and emotions in three groups of young women ($n = 160$): participants with eating pathology and high body dissatisfaction (EPHBD), a group exhibiting high body dissatisfaction (HBD), and participants with low body dissatisfaction (LBD). All groups engaged in upward appearance comparisons, although EPHBD and HBD did so to the greatest extent. The EPHBD group experienced the most intense negative emotions, more frequent thoughts of dieting and exercising, and engaged in more disordered eating behaviour following upward comparisons compared to the other groups. Further, the HBD group was more negatively affected than the LBD group. However, when participants engaged in upward appearance comparisons, *all* groups experienced increases in levels of guilt and thoughts of dieting, and decreases in body satisfaction and social esteem levels.

Nevertheless, upward appearance comparisons are not equally detrimental to all people, and they are also likely to differ across situations within the same individual (Myers & Crowther, 2009). A key aim of the present study was, therefore, to examine one such situational characteristic, namely psychological need frustration, which may partly explain variations in emotional and behavioural vulnerability to upward appearance comparisons.

1.3. The potential role of psychological need frustration

Thøgersen-Ntoumani, Ntoumanis, and Nikitaras (2010) called for an integration of Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000) and SCT factors to facilitate understanding of body image concerns. SDT is a macro-motivational theory which proposes that the satisfaction or frustration of three basic psychological needs, the needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, have important repercussions for affective, cognitive and behavioural outcomes. Thøgersen-Ntoumani et al. asserted that while SCT deals with *proximal* predictors of body image relevant outcomes, concepts from SDT can be used to enhance understanding of the “deeper psychological mechanisms that foster versus undermine personal growth and development and can lead to unhealthy behaviours” (p. 536). According to SDT, the psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness constitute the psychological nutrients which, when satisfied, allow people to grow, thrive and experience psychological well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). When these needs are not satisfied, individuals are likely to suffer psychologically.

More recently, researchers using SDT have shown that need frustration is a stronger predictor of ill-being than low need satisfaction (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, Bosch, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2011). For example, with respect to body image-related outcomes, Bartholomew et al. demonstrated that general need frustration was a stronger predictor of disordered eating in athletes compared to need satisfaction. When individuals’ needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are frustrated, they develop coping resources in the form of need substitutes and/or compensatory behaviours (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Need substitutes can be manifested through the endorsement of the thin-ideal, body image concerns, and compensatory behaviours such as rigid and restrictive eating patterns (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

One important limitation of the work on psychological needs to date is the tendency to assess psychological needs at the trait level. To our knowledge, only one published study has examined the role of daily need frustration in predicting body-image relevant outcomes. Specifically, Verstuyf, Vansteenkiste, Soenens, Boone, and Mouratidis (2013) looked at daily experiences of need frustration and their associations with binge eating in female adolescents ($n = 302$). They found that on days when the participants reported that their needs were frustrated, they were more likely to engage in binge eating behaviour. However, the Verstuyf et al. study did not consider how state experiences of need frustration interact with upward appearance comparisons in the prediction of body image outcomes. Given research demonstrates that psychological need frustration can place individuals at risk of experiencing body image concerns and disordered eating (Bartholomew et al., 2011), we expect that psychological need frustration is likely to exacerbate any negative impacts of upward appearance comparisons.

1.4. Study aims

This study represents the first attempt to integrate key constructs from both SCT and SDT in the prediction of body-image related outcomes employing an EMA design. It is proposed that daily experiences of need frustration will magnify the negative associations between upward appearance comparisons and a range of emotional, cognitive and behavioural body image outcomes. Specifically, first, we hypothesise that in situations when participants engage in upward appearance comparisons, they will report greater levels of body-related shame and guilt, lower levels of pride, and will be more likely to think about and engage in compensatory behaviours (dietary restriction and exercise for weight control) than when they do not engage in upward appearance comparisons (H1). Second, when participants experience high levels of psychological need frustration, they will experience similar outcomes as those outlined for H1 compared to situations in which they report low levels of need frustration (H2). Finally, when individuals experience high levels of psychological need frustration and

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