



The appearance culture between friends and adolescent appearance-based rejection sensitivity



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ABSTRACT

Appearance-based rejection sensitivity (appearance-RS) is the tendency to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and overreact to signs of rejection based on one's appearance, and is associated with a number of psychological and social problems (Park, 2007). This study of 380 adolescents ($M_{\text{age}} = 13.84$) examined a model linking the appearance culture between friends with appearance-RS in adolescent boys and girls, via internalisation of appearance ideals, social comparison, and body dissatisfaction. Gender differences were also tested. Consistent with expectations, appearance-focused characteristics of the friendship context were associated with heightened appearance-RS via internalization of appearance ideals, social comparison, and body dissatisfaction. The appearance-focused friend characteristics that were associated with appearance-RS included exposure to friends' appearance conversations, appearance teasing that caused distress, and perceived pressure to be attractive. Notably, associations rarely differed for boys and girls, with one exception: the association between BMI and body dissatisfaction was stronger in girls than in boys.

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Appearance-based rejection sensitivity (appearance-RS) is the tendency to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and overreact to signs of rejection based on personal appearance (Park, 2007). Appearance-RS has only attracted research in the past few years, but it has been identified as a significant correlate of a number of psychological problems, including poor self-esteem, social withdrawal, social anxiety, and a sense of self-worth that is conditional on appearance (Bowker, Thomas, Spencer, & Park, 2013; Park, 2007; Park & Pinkus, 2009). High appearance-RS individuals show elevated symptoms of body dysmorphic disorder and greater endorsement of cosmetic surgery (Calogero, Park, Rahemtulla, & Williams, 2010; Park, Calogero, Young, & DiRaddo, 2010). Yet, much of this research has been conducted with university students, and much more attention should be given to research with children and adolescents in order to isolate the factors that may be linked with early onset of heightened appearance-RS. At present, very little is known about appearance-RS in children and adolescents, with only one published study of appearance-RS in adolescents (Bowker et al., 2013).

Although this previous study shows that many adolescents do have very high concerns about rejection because of their appearance, many questions remain. In particular, the role of peer relationships and interactions deserves further attention, given the strong influence that peers have on a range of unhealthy attitudes and behaviours during adolescence, including body image and eating behaviours (Blodgett Salafia & Gondoli, 2011). Furthermore, it is friends, both same-sex and other-sex, who increase in their importance and influence during adolescence compared to in childhood (Bukowski, Hoza, & Boivin,

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1993), eventually surpassing parents' influence in some domains, including in the domain of style, dress, and other aspects of appearance (Smetana, 2002).

In addition, the widely supported sociocultural (or tripartite influence) theory posits that social influences (including the media, family, and peers) exert their influence on body image and eating behaviours via social comparison and internalisation of appearance ideals (see van den Berg, Thompson, Obrowski-Brandon, & Covert, 2002; Keery, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004; Kopp & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2011; Muris, Meesters, van de Blom, & Mayer, 2005; Shroff & Thompson, 2006; Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). Moreover, body dissatisfaction should also play a mediational role for appearance-RS. Previous research suggests that individuals with heightened appearance-RS filter and interpret information from their environment through an 'appearance lens' (Park & Harwin, 2010). Heightened body dissatisfaction is likely to trigger a more pessimistic appearance lens in relation to self-evaluations, potentially contributing to increasing sensitivity to appearance-based rejection. Thus, the aim of the present study was to examine how exposure to an appearance culture in peer and friendship groups, such as more exposure to verbal exchanges and teasing about appearance, is associated with elevated appearance-RS by testing a comprehensive model whereby internalisation of appearance ideals and social comparison, as well as body dissatisfaction, were expected to mediate the association between appearance culture and appearance-RS. Fig. 1 presents the hypothesised model.

Peer appearance culture and appearance-RS

Two previous studies of social relationships and appearance-RS have been conducted, one with adolescents (Bowker et al., 2013) and a second with university students (Park, DiRaddo, & Calogero, 2009). Bowker et al. (2013) found that peer relationships moderated associations between appearance-RS and psychological maladjustment in early adolescents. Specifically, other-sex friendships were protective, while peer-rated acceptance by other-sex classmates was a risk factor, for associations between appearance-RS and psychological maladjustment. In young adults, perceiving one's acceptance by friends as being conditional on appearance was found to be associated with elevated appearance-RS (Park, DiRaddo, et al., 2009). Together, these studies support the importance of peer relationships in association with appearance-RS.

Given that only two studies have been conducted, it was necessary to draw upon theory and related supporting evidence (van den Berg et al., 2002; Cafri, Yamamiya, Brannick, & Thompson, 2005; Keery et al., 2004) to identify other social factors likely to be associated with elevated appearance-RS in adolescents. One prominent theory regards the role of the "appearance culture" within the adolescent friendship and broader peer contexts (Jones, Vigfusdottir, & Lee, 2004). An

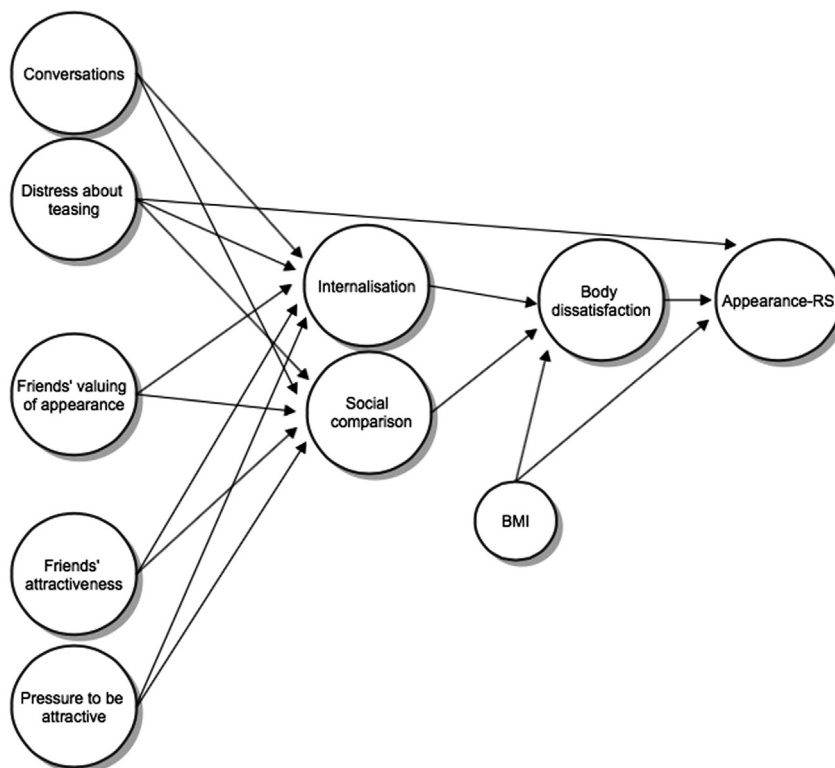


Fig. 1. Hypothesised model.

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