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Original article

The role of peer influence on girls' body dissatisfaction and dieting

Le rôle de l'influence des pairs sur l'insatisfaction corporelle et le régime amaigrissant des jeunes filles

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. – Peer influence is considered a global construct, although the effects of its various dimensions on body dissatisfaction and dieting via internalisation of the thin ideal and social comparison have yet to be analysed.

Objective. – The aim of this study was to analyse how the different dimensions of peer influence (i.e., perception of teasing, appearance conversation with friends and peer attributions about the importance of appearance with regard to popularity) affect body dissatisfaction and dieting.

Method. – A total of 298 Italian adolescent girls and young women completed a questionnaire assessing different dimensions of peer influence, internalisation of the thin ideal, social comparison, body dissatisfaction and dieting.

Results. – The results indicated that peer attributions and appearance conversations with friends affect body dissatisfaction and dieting through internalisation and social comparison. Teasing had a direct effect on girls' dissatisfaction levels.

Conclusions. – The current findings have important preventive and treatment implications. Preventive interventions should not target sociocultural influences as a whole, rather they should analyse the specific dimensions of peer influence, with consideration for the degree to which girls internalise sociocultural messages and engage in social comparison.

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R É S U M É

Introduction. – Les influences des pairs ont été généralement vues comme des constructions globales, sans analyser les effets de différentes dimensions sur l'insatisfaction corporelle et le régime amaigrissant à travers l'internalisation de l'idéal de minceur et la comparaison sociale.

Objectif. – Le but de cette étude était d'analyser comment les différentes dimensions de l'influence des pairs (la perception des taquineries, les conversations avec des amis à propos de l'apparence et les attributions des pairs concernant l'importance de l'apparence pour être populaire) affectent l'insatisfaction corporelle et le régime amaigrissant.

Méthode. – Deux cent quatre-vingt-dix-huit adolescentes italiennes (15–19 ans) ont rempli un questionnaire évaluant les différentes dimensions de l'influence des pairs, l'internalisation de l'idéal de minceur, la comparaison sociale, l'insatisfaction corporelle et le régime amaigrissant.

Résultats. – Les résultats indiquent que les attributions des pairs et les conversations avec des amis affectent l'insatisfaction corporelle et le régime amaigrissant à travers l'internalisation de l'idéal de minceur et la comparaison sociale. Les taquineries, quant à elles, ont un effet direct sur les niveaux de l'insatisfaction des adolescentes.

Conclusions. – Ces résultats ont des implications importantes pour la prévention et le traitement. Les interventions préventives ne devraient pas cibler l'influence socioculturelle dans son ensemble, mais plutôt tenir compte des dimensions spécifiques de l'influence des pairs et du degré auquel les jeunes filles intériorisent les messages socioculturels et se livrent à des comparaisons sociales.

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Body image seems to be particularly important for female adolescents and young women, who have been socialised to believe that appearance is relevant for self-evaluation and for evaluation by others (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). There is a decline in the positive perception of attractiveness during adolescence, which leads to greater dissatisfaction with one's body image and physical features, especially among girls (Ricciardelli, McCabe, Holt, & Finemore, 2003). Moreover, adolescence is an important developmental period with regard to the emergence of dieting and eating problems (Mooney, Farley, & Strugnell, 2004; Spear, 2006). Body image and eating behaviours are strictly related given that body dissatisfaction is a main risk factor that predicts eating disorders in young women (Stice, 2002; Stice & Shaw, 2002). One way that body dissatisfaction may lead to the development of eating disorders in adolescent girls and young women is dietary restraint (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001; Stice, 1994). Given the negative consequences of body dissatisfaction and dietary restraint (Stice & Shaw, 2002), identifying their antecedents is important for creating effective treatment programs, preventing eating disorders and promoting health (Cafri, Yamamiya, Brannick, & Thompson, 2005; Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002; Nerini, 2009).

In Italy, where the present study was conducted, body dissatisfaction is common, especially among females, with 56% of women describing themselves as unsatisfied with their bodies (ISS, 2005). In a study conducted in six European countries, Preti et al. (2009) found that the lifetime prevalence estimates of anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, binge eating disorder, sub-threshold binge eating disorder, and any type of binge eating were 0.48%, 0.51%, 1.12%, 0.72%, and 2.15%, respectively. Lifetime prevalence estimates were higher in Italy (any eating disorder: 3.35%, CI 2.2–5.0), France (4.15%, 95% CI 2.3–7.4) and Belgium (3.54%, 2.0–6.3) compared to the three other participating countries (Netherlands: 1.74%, 0.9–3.3; Germany: 1.28%, 0.8–2.1; Spain: 2.42%, 1.5–4.0). In the present research, we examined the significant predictors of body dissatisfaction and dieting among Italian adolescent girls and young women.

Research has confirmed the influence of sociocultural factors on body dissatisfaction levels (Anschutz, Engels, & Van Strien, 2008; Cafri et al., 2005; Cash, 2005). The Tripartite Influence Model ([TIM] Thompson et al., 1999) is a useful framework for understanding a variety of influences that may affect body image disturbances. The model, which has received empirical support with female samples (Keery, van der Berg, & Thompson, 2004), proposes that three sources of influence (peers, parents, and media) exert their effect on body image and eating disturbance through two mediational processes: internalisation of societal ideals and excessive appearance comparison. The TIM states that these processes have a specific role in determining body dissatisfaction levels; although they are both core psychological mechanisms affecting body image, they are different constructs with their own specificity. Internalisation is defined as the incorporation of specific values to the point that these values become guiding principles (Thompson, van den Berg, Roehrig, Guarda, & Heinberg, 2004), whereas social comparison represents the tendency to compare one's own body and appearance to others (Thompson, Heinberg, & Tantleff, 1991). Internalisation of the thin ideal, or the extent to which an individual accepts socially defined ideals of attractiveness, has been theorised as enhancing body dissatisfaction (Thompson et al., 1999). A meta-analysis conducted by Cafri et al. (2005) confirmed the existence of a strong relationship between internalisation of the thin ideal and body dissatisfaction. Thompson and Stice (2001) showed that elevated thin ideal internalisation emerges as a risk factor for both body dissatisfaction and the onset of eating disorders. Furthermore, longitudinal studies have established that high levels of thin ideal internalisation predict increases in body dissatisfaction among girls (Bradford & Petrie, 2008).

The concept of social comparison was derived from the Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), which argues that individuals have an innate drive to evaluate dimensions of the self, such as their body image. Many studies confirmed that social comparison can affect body dissatisfaction levels (Keery et al., 2004; Myers & Crowther, 2009). Social comparison was found to be a relevant mechanism through which media can negatively influence girls' body image (Cattarin, Thompson, Thomas, & Williams, 2000; Clay, Vignoles, & Dittmar, 2005): comparisons with unrealistic female images might be frustrating, leading to a decline in girls' body satisfaction's levels. Although the TIM has been used as a theoretical point of reference to test the effects of social influences on body image, there are only a few studies in which two key processes – internalisation and social comparison – have been taken into account simultaneously in examining body dissatisfaction's antecedents; in such studies social influences have been typically treated as whole concepts and the different contribution of specific forms of peer and media influence has not been examined.

In this research, we analysed the role of both internalisation and social comparison in mediating the relation between specific forms of peer influence and body dissatisfaction and dieting, with the aim of obtaining a more complete view of how these psychological processes work in determining the outcome of interest. The relation existing between internalisation and social comparison was investigated as well, since inconsistent results concerning this issue were found in the literature. Although some applications of the model supported the role of social comparison as a mediator between social influences and internalisation of a thin ideal, so that individuals with greater tendencies toward social comparison are more likely to engage in the process of internalisation (e.g., Chen, Gao, & Jackson, 2007; Keery et al., 2004; Shroff & Thompson, 2006), other studies found that the direction of the relationship between internalisation and social comparison was different (Clay et al., 2005; Durkin, Paxton, & Sorbello, 2007). According to these findings, social comparison mediates the relationship between internalisation and body dissatisfaction, so that internalisation of thin ideals increases social comparison with media models. Since evaluation needs some standards of reference, this alternative position appears more plausible. In other words, it is reasonable to suggest that internalisation of standards establishes the frame of reference for social comparison, which represents the basic process for self-evaluation. Therefore, we hypothesized that adolescents and young women use aesthetic ideals as comparison dimensions only after they have internalised specific standards of beauty.

With regard to sociocultural influences, the role that the media play in affecting body image has been widely investigated, whereas peer influence and its effect on body dissatisfaction and eating behaviours has not received enough attention. This is especially true when we consider that adolescent girls tend to develop their sense of self in the context of relationships. Adolescents tend to spend most of their time with peers; therefore, relationships with friends become very important for the development of one's identity, as peer experiences usually provide an important social context (Brown, Mory, & Kinney, 1994). Thus, it is important to examine the appearance culture among peers when studying body image during adolescence (Jones, Vigfusdottir, & Lee, 2004). A consistent body of research has suggested that peer influence can affect perceptions of body dissatisfaction (Keery et al., 2004; van der Berg, Thompson, Obremski-Brandon, & Coover, 2002) and dysfunctional eating behaviours (van der Berg et al., 2002). In recent years, a number of authors (e.g., Shroff & Thompson, 2006; Thompson et al., 2007) have highlighted the importance of considering peer influence as a multidimensional construct. Peer influence can be described as multifaceted given that it has been studied in the form of teasing, peers conversations regarding appearance and peer

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