

# The Relationships Among Social Comparisons, Body Surveillance, and Body Dissatisfaction in the Natural Environment

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We examined the relationships among social comparisons (i.e., body, eating, and exercise), body surveillance, and body dissatisfaction in the natural environment. Participants were 232 college women who completed a daily diary protocol for 2 weeks, responding to online surveys 3 times per day. When the contemporaneous relationships among these variables were examined in a single model, results indicated that comparing one's body, eating, or exercise to

others or engaging in body surveillance was associated with elevated body dissatisfaction in the same short-term assessment period. Additionally, individuals with high trait-like engagement in body comparisons or body surveillance experienced higher levels of body dissatisfaction. Trait-like eating and exercise comparison tendencies did not predict unique variance in body dissatisfaction. When examined prospectively in a single model, trait-like body comparison and body surveillance remained predictors of body dissatisfaction, but the only more state-like behavior predictive of body dissatisfaction at the next assessment was eating comparison. Results provide support for the notion that naturalistic body dissatisfaction is predicted by both state- and trait-like characteristics. In particular, social comparisons (i.e., body, eating, and exercise) and body surveillance may function as proximal triggers for contemporaneous body dissatisfaction, with eating comparisons emerging as an especially important predictor of body dissatisfaction over time. Regarding trait-like predictors, general tendencies to engage in body comparisons and body surveillance may be more potent distal predictors of body dissatisfaction than general eating or exercise comparison tendencies.

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BODY DISSATISFACTION REFERS TO the negative subjective evaluation of one's physical body, such as one's weight and shape (Garner, 2002; Pearson, Heffner, & Follette, 2010; Stice & Shaw, 2002), and is ubiquitous among women in Western society. Indeed, body dissatisfaction is experienced by up to 80% of college women (Neighbors & Sobal, 2007; Silberstein, Striegel-Moore, Timko, & Rodin, 1988; Vohs, Heatherton, & Herrin, 2001). Furthermore, body dissatisfaction is a strong risk factor for disordered eating and eating disorders (Stice, 2002). In particular, body dissatisfaction is thought to increase risk for eating pathology via two main mechanisms: dieting and negative affect (Stice & Shaw). Given the associations between body dissatisfaction and various negative consequences, it is important to understand specific factors that may impact an individual's level of discontent with the body. We will explore two such constructs in the current study: social comparison and body surveillance.

Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) posits that humans have a natural drive to assess their standing in life, and thus, individuals engage in social comparisons with others in order to understand how and where they fit into the world. In order to make an accurate comparison, individuals will typically compare themselves to those with whom they are most similar—that is, a peer (Lin & Kulik, 2002). There is ample evidence that college women engage in frequent comparisons with peers (e.g., Leahey, Crowther, & Mickelson, 2007). Indeed, college campuses are settings that lend themselves to engagement in this behavior (Fitzsimmons-Craft, 2011), as women are surrounded by many other women of about their same age with whom they interact both directly and indirectly on a near-constant basis (Lindner, Hughes, & Fahy, 2008). Engaging in social comparison with peers (both generally and specific to appearance) has been found to be associated with body dissatisfaction—a finding that has been demonstrated by both correlational and experimental work (e.g., Bamford & Halliwell, 2009; Myers & Crowther, 2009; Heinberg & Thompson, 1992; Stormer & Thompson, 1996; Thompson, Heinberg, & Tantleff, 1991; Trottier, Polivy, & Herman, 2007). It may be that via social comparison, an individual comes to realize that there is a discrepancy between her ideal body and her actual body.

It thus appears that general and appearance-related social comparison tendencies are associated with body dissatisfaction. However, not all individuals who engage in high levels of general comparison focus on appearance as a prominent area of comparison, which may result in a weakened social comparison–body dissatisfaction relationship (relative to using a more body-related measure of this construct). From a different perspective, only assessing appearance-related comparison may be too narrow of an approach since it does not account for the potential effects of other body-related comparisons, such as comparisons regarding exercise, on body dissatisfaction (Fitzsimmons-Craft, Harney, et al., 2012). Thus, it may be important to measure social comparison in a way that more comprehensively assesses the types of comparisons that play a role in eating pathology. For example, other more specific social comparison domains, such as those related to eating and exercise, may also play a role in body dissatisfaction. Indeed, body, eating, and exercise social comparison tendencies have been found to account for significant variance in body dissatisfaction both contemporaneously and 1 year later (Fitzsimmons-Craft & Bardone-Cone, 2014; Fitzsimmons-Craft, Bardone-Cone, & Harney, 2012). Thus, we will assess all three of these types of social comparison in the current study.

Objectification theory holds that within dominant American culture, the feminine body has been constructed as an object to be looked at (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; McKinley & Hyde, 1996) and gazed upon (Spitzack, 1990). Because the feminine body exists in this context, females learn to view themselves from an observer's perspective and to treat themselves as objects to be looked at, which is known as self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts; McKinley & Hyde). Self-objectification is in turn thought to behaviorally manifest itself in the act of body surveillance (Moradi & Huang, 2008), which involves thinking about how one's body looks to an outside observer and thinking more about how one's body looks than how it feels (McKinley & Hyde). Body surveillance may lead a woman to realize that there is a discrepancy between what her body actually looks like and what she would ideally like her body to look like, which in turn may be associated with negative consequences. Indeed, both correlational and experimental studies have demonstrated that engagement in body surveillance is associated with body dissatisfaction (e.g., Forbes, Jobe, & Revak, 2006; Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998; Knauss, Paxton, & Alsaker, 2008; McKinley, 1998).

Although there is evidence that both social comparison and body surveillance are associated

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