



# Mediators of the relationship between thin-ideal internalization and body dissatisfaction in the natural environment<sup>☆</sup>



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 19 February 2016

Accepted 16 June 2016

### Keywords:

Thin-ideal internalization

Body dissatisfaction

Social comparison

Objectification

Body surveillance

Ecological momentary assessment

## ABSTRACT

Social comparisons (i.e., body, eating, exercise) and body surveillance were tested as mediators of the thin-ideal internalization–body dissatisfaction relationship using ecological momentary assessment (EMA). Participants were 232 college women who completed a 2-week EMA protocol, responding to questions three times per day. Multilevel path analysis was used to examine a 2-1-1 mediation model (thin-ideal internalization assessed as trait; between-person effects examined) and a 1-1-1 model (component of thin-ideal internalization [thin-ideal importance] assessed momentarily; within- and between-person effects examined). For the 2-1-1 model, only body comparison and body surveillance were significant specific mediators of the between-person effect. For the 1-1-1 model, all four variables were significant specific mediators of the within-person effect. Only body comparison was a significant specific mediator of the between-person effect. At the state level, many processes explain the thin-ideal internalization–body dissatisfaction relationship. However, at the trait level, body comparison and body surveillance are more important explanatory factors.

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## Introduction

Thin-ideal internalization refers to the extent to which an individual “buys into” societal ideals of attractiveness (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999; Thompson & Stice, 2001). The weight of idealized women in the media is extremely low (e.g., Byrd-Bredbenner, Murray, & Schluskel, 2005; Sypeck et al., 2006;

Wiseman, Gray, Mosimann, & Ahrens, 1992), and coupled with these thin-ideal images comes the message that individuals who are thin are the most valued, loved, and successful (Hesse-Biber, Leavy, Quinn, & Zoino, 2006). Western culture has supported the notion that the extremely thin look is both desirable and achievable, when in fact, this ideal is very difficult for most women to achieve and maintain (Brownell, 1991).

The internalization of these societal ideals of attractiveness may be associated with negative effects, such as body dissatisfaction. Given the impossibility of the thin-ideal standard, many women may perceive they have been unable to attain this ideal and feel badly about their own appearance. Indeed, both cross-sectional and prospective studies have demonstrated links between thin-ideal internalization and body dissatisfaction (e.g., Fitzsimmons-Craft et al., 2012, 2014; Keery, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004; Shroff & Thompson, 2006; Stice & Whitenton, 2002).

Research has begun to explore factors that may translate internalization of the thin ideal into body dissatisfaction, namely social comparison and body surveillance, constructs derived from established theoretical frameworks. Festinger's (1954) social

<sup>☆</sup> This research is based on the doctoral dissertation of Ellen Fitzsimmons-Craft under the direction of Anna Bardone-Cone and was conducted at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. This research was supported by the following grants: F31 MH093978 from the National Institute of Mental Health; T32 HL007456 from the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Department of Psychology Earl and Barbara Baughman Dissertation Research Award.

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comparison theory put forth that humans engage in social comparison with others to understand how and where they fit into the world, and the Tripartite Influence Model (van den Berg, Thompson, Obremski-Brandon, & Coovert, 2002) suggested a role for social comparison in body image disturbance. This theory posited that comparing oneself to others may explain the relation between sociocultural influence from peers, family, and media and body dissatisfaction. Likewise, objectification theory holds that in Western culture, the female body has been constructed as an object to be looked at (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; McKinley & Hyde, 1996). As a result, females learn to view themselves from an observer's perspective and treat themselves as objects to be looked at. This self-objectification is thought to behaviorally manifest as body surveillance (Moradi & Huang, 2008), involving thinking about how one's body looks to an observer and thinking more about how one's body looks than how it feels.

More recently, the elaborated sociocultural model of disordered eating (Fitzsimmons-Craft, 2011) integrated social comparison and objectification theories, positing that both theoretical constructs may help explain the relationship between thin-ideal internalization and body dissatisfaction. It may be that via both social comparison and body surveillance, individuals evaluate their proximity to the ideal and feel badly about their bodies—social comparison provides for direct comparison and body surveillance is the monitoring piece that may kick off the evaluation process. Fitzsimmons-Craft et al. (2014) tested the elaborated sociocultural model using cross-sectional, traditional self-report data, finding that eating disorder-related social comparison (a construct including body, eating, and exercise comparison dimensions) mediated the thin-ideal internalization–body dissatisfaction relationship in a sample of college women. These findings highlight the importance of focusing on the range of social comparison domains (i.e., body, eating, exercise) that may stem from thin-ideal internalization and be associated with body image disturbance. Indeed, Fitzsimmons-Craft et al. (2012) found that neither general nor appearance-related social comparison tendencies mediated the relationship between thin-ideal internalization and body dissatisfaction in a cross-sectional study of college women, hypothesizing that general measures of social comparison may be too general and that appearance-related measures may be too narrow for comprehensively capturing the types of comparison that translate internalization of the thin ideal into dissatisfaction with the body. Although both body surveillance and self-objectification have been found to mediate the thin-ideal internalization–body dissatisfaction relationship in cross-sectional studies of college women (Fitzsimmons-Craft et al., 2012; Myers & Crowther, 2007), body surveillance did not emerge as a significant mediator in the context of the elaborated sociocultural model (Fitzsimmons-Craft et al., 2014). The authors hypothesized that social comparison may be a more “potent” mediator relative to body surveillance, as it may provide a woman with a more direct means of assessing how she measures up to others.

Although there is some evidence that body, eating, and exercise comparisons and body surveillance may mediate the relationship between thin-ideal internalization and body dissatisfaction, and both have been concurrently investigated as mediators of this relationship (Fitzsimmons-Craft et al., 2014), previous research has been limited in two major ways. First, past work has been conducted in settings that lack ecological validity (e.g., laboratory). This is problematic given that data generated in such settings may not be generalizable to individuals' lived experiences in the real world (Shiffman, Stone, & Hufford, 2008). Second, previous studies have used measurement strategies that rely heavily on retrospective recall, which is a shortcoming because human memory can be unreliable (Shiffman et al., 2008). Ecological momentary assessment (EMA) circumvents these issues and involves assessing participants

multiple times per day in their natural environments. EMA has ecological validity because data are collected in the natural environment and reduced retrospective recall biases because participants are asked to report on only very recent experiences (Smyth et al., 2001). To our knowledge, research has yet to use this methodology to examine mediators of the thin-ideal internalization–body dissatisfaction relation; however, previous research using these data has established that comparing one's body, eating, or exercise to others or engaging in body surveillance is associated with body dissatisfaction in the same short-term assessment period (Fitzsimmons-Craft et al., 2015).

The purpose of the current study was thus to use EMA to understand the mechanisms by which thin-ideal internalization is associated with body dissatisfaction in a more momentary fashion. We hypothesized that momentary engagement in body, eating, and exercise social comparisons and body surveillance would mediate the relation between trait thin-ideal internalization and momentary body dissatisfaction. Given that thin-ideal internalization has typically been conceptualized as “trait-like” in the literature (e.g., Colautti et al., 2011; Suisman et al., 2012), we were interested in how the hypothesized mediation model would hold when thin-ideal internalization was assessed at the trait level. However, we were also interested in testing this assumption (i.e., that thin-ideal internalization is a stable, trait-like construct), as some work has argued for state-like components for this construct and that it can be influenced by contextual factors (Karazsia, van Dulmen, Wong, & Crowther, 2013). We thus examined whether a component of thin-ideal internalization—thin-ideal importance—varied moment-to-moment. Notably, a participant's lack of endorsement for momentary thin-ideal importance could suggest: (1) that their level of thin-ideal internalization was fluctuating and they were downgrading its significance; or (2) that they were not thinking about physical appearance at the time of the assessment. As such, in order to test whether this construct may be suggestive of a state component for thin-ideal internalization, we tested whether thin-ideal importance was associated with momentary body dissatisfaction even after controlling for amount of time spent thinking about appearance. Finally, we tested whether our mediational model would hold when using this indicator of momentary thin-ideal internalization as the independent variable.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 235 women attending a large, public South-eastern university who were recruited through introductory psychology courses. This study was part of a larger study on psychosocial predictors of college women's body image and disordered eating (Fitzsimmons-Craft et al., 2014). At the initial study assessment, participants ranged in age from 17 to 22 years, with a mean age of 18.70 years ( $SD = 1.00$ ). Most women (68.9%) identified as White, 7.7% as African American or Black, 7.7% as Asian, 4.3% as Hispanic, 1.3% as American Indian or Alaskan Native, 9.8% as multiracial/multiethnic, and 0.4% as other races/ethnicities. Highest parental education was used as a proxy for socioeconomic status and ranged from 7 to 21 years ( $M = 16.50$ ,  $SD = 2.68$ ). Body mass index (BMI) was calculated from self-reported height and weight and ranged from 16.13 to 41.60 kg/m<sup>2</sup> ( $M = 22.56$ ,  $SD = 3.43$ ).

### Procedure

First, participants attended a study orientation session at the beginning of an academic semester which informed them about study procedures, EMA reporting procedures, and behaviors

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