



## Interpersonal rejection results in increased appearance satisfaction for women who rely on body weight for self-worth



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### ABSTRACT

This study examined whether body weight contingent self-worth (BWCSW), the tendency to base self-worth on body weight, moderates the effects of interpersonal rejection on self-esteem and body satisfaction. In an online survey, female undergraduates ( $N = 148$ ) completed measures of trait self-esteem, depression, and BWCSW. In a subsequent lab session, participants were assigned to either an interpersonal rejection or to a neutral control condition, after which they completed measures of state self-esteem and body satisfaction. Compared to women with lower BWCSW, women with higher BWCSW reported lower appearance self-esteem ( $p = .001$ ) and body satisfaction ( $p = .004$ ) across conditions. However, they reacted to rejection by reporting greater appearance self-esteem ( $p = .034$ ) and body satisfaction ( $p = .021$ ). Rejection had no effect on women with lower BWCSW. The reaction of women with higher BWCSW is interpreted as a compensatory self-enhancement response to interpersonal rejection within a self-important domain.

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### Introduction

Body satisfaction is an important facet of body image attitudes and refers to evaluative beliefs about one's appearance (Cash, 2012). Understanding the factors contributing to body dissatisfaction is important, as it is associated with a lower quality of life (Mond et al., 2013) and is a major precursor to the development of eating disorders (Cooley & Toray, 2001; Johnson & Wardle, 2005).

Self-esteem is consistently linked to body satisfaction. For example, low self-esteem is strongly associated with body dissatisfaction among adolescents of various ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds (van den Berg, Mond, Eisenberg, Ackard, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2010), and with negative body attitudes in adults across the lifespan (Wilcox, 1997). However, the precise nature of this association is unclear and whether contributors to low self-esteem also can lower body satisfaction, and for whom, remains largely unexplored.

A major determinant of self-esteem is one's perceived performance in self-important domains. According to Crocker and Wolfe (2001), contingencies of self-worth are the specific domains of life from which people derive their self-esteem. Central to this perspective is the proposition that people seek self-esteem

by pursuing success and avoiding failure in the domains on which they base their self-worth (Crocker, 2002). This is supported by studies showing that negative feedback targeting specific domains of the self more negatively affects the global self-esteem of individuals for whom these domains are important. For example, negative feedback regarding interpersonal qualities results in lower global self-esteem for those who base their self-worth on others' approval than it does for those who do not base their self-worth on this domain (Park & Crocker, 2008).

Among the domains on which self-esteem can be contingent, physical appearance is particularly important to both men and women (Harter, 1999), and of the various components of physical appearance, body weight is considered central for women (Fan, Liu, Wu, & Dai, 2004; Puhl & Boland, 2001; Swami, Greven, & Furnham, 2007; Tovée & Cornelissen, 2001; Tovée, Maisey, Emery, & Cornelissen, 1998). Therefore, Clabaugh, Karpinski, and Griffin (2008) suggest that many women disproportionately base their self-worth on this specific domain of appearance. Body weight is considered to be a particularly unhealthy self-worth domain as it is associated with low and unstable self-esteem, as well as negative body image-related consequences, including greater subjective weight, body shape anxiety, and disordered eating (Clabaugh et al., 2008).

Another demonstrated major determinant of self-esteem is interpersonal connectedness. According to the sociometer theory, self-esteem functions as an internal monitor of one's perceived

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relational value to others (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Leary & Downs, 1995) and results from an assessment of the consequences of one's behaviour for social inclusion or exclusion (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). From this perspective, it is one's perceived inclusionary status that increases or decreases self-esteem. In support of this proposition, studies have shown that one's perceived relational value affects global state self-esteem (see Leary, 2005 for a review), such that individuals who are socially accepted report high self-esteem (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and those who are rejected experience low self-worth (Leary et al., 1995).

Combining the contingencies of self-worth perspective and the sociometer theory, MacDonald, Saltzman, and Leary (2003) suggest that contingencies of self-worth may be considered contingencies of relational value. Specifically, the importance of one's perceived relational value for self-esteem likely promotes investment in self-worth domains that are considered instrumental for gaining social approval and avoiding disapproval. For example, self-ratings of attractiveness are more strongly related to global self-esteem for individuals who believe that attractiveness is important for others' approval, compared to those who believe that attractiveness is of lesser importance for social approval (MacDonald et al., 2003). It is therefore reasonable to suggest that social rejection should have the most negative impact within domains of contingent self-worth, as these are considered instrumental in achieving interpersonal success.

Applied to the body weight contingency of self-worth, this suggests that social rejection should have the strongest negative impact on the body image evaluation of women for whom body weight is a strongly contingent self-esteem domain. The purpose of the present study was to test the general prediction that social threat would more negatively affect the body image evaluation of women whose sense of self-worth is highly reliant on body weight, than it would for women who base their self-worth on this domain to a lesser extent. Our hypotheses were as follows: First, because body weight contingent self-worth is associated with negative body image (Clabaugh et al., 2008), we predicted that women with higher body weight contingent self-worth would have significantly lower appearance self-esteem and body satisfaction than would women with lower body weight contingent self-worth regardless of social rejection.

Second, because self-contingent domains are likely to be perceived as key elements of interpersonal success or failure (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Leary & Downs, 1995), we predicted that for women with higher body weight contingent self-worth, interpersonal rejection would result in significantly lower appearance self-esteem and body satisfaction, than it would for women lower in body weight contingent self-worth. In addition, we expected this effect to be unique to the domain of body image and that other domains of self-esteem, such as social and performance, would be unaffected by this combination of predictors. We also expected that the effect of rejection on body image evaluation would be moderated specifically by body weight contingent self-worth and that other domains of self-worth (see "Measures" section) would not moderate the effect of rejection on body image evaluation. Furthermore, because BMI (Swami et al., 2010), trait self-esteem (Furnham, Badmin, & Sneade, 2002; Lowery et al., 2005) and depressive symptoms (Joiner, Schmidt, & Singh, 1994) are associated with body dissatisfaction, we tested the above predictions after controlling for these variables.

Finally, we predicted that women higher in body weight contingent self-worth would be more likely to attribute interpersonal rejection to the domain of physical appearance, than would women who base their self-worth on this domain to a lesser extent.

## Method

### Participants

A total of 187 participants completed this study. After exclusion of seven individuals with past history of being diagnosed with an eating disorder and of 32 participants (rejection condition = 27; control condition = 5) who expressed suspicion regarding the aim of the study, data from 148 female undergraduate students were retained. All participants were recruited from the Department of Psychology participant pool and were compensated with course credit. Their mean age was 21.24 ( $SD = 3.76$ ) and their average BMI was 24.38  $\text{kg}/\text{m}^2$  ( $SD = 4.81$ ; range = 16.96–43.65). Self-reported ethnicity was as follows: 61.90% Caucasian, 8.16% East Asian, 7.48% Arab or West Asian, 6.80% South Asian, 5.44% Caribbean, 4.76% African, 2.72% Aboriginal, and 2.72% South or Central American. Overall, 50.50% of participants were psychology majors.

### Measures

The Body Weight Contingency of Self-Worth Scale (BWCSW; Clabaugh et al., 2008) is an 8-item self-report measure of the extent to which self-worth is based on body weight. Items such as "My self-esteem is influenced by my body weight" are scored on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicate a greater tendency to base self-esteem on body weight. Internal consistency in the current study was  $\alpha = .94$ .

The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) is a 20-item self-report measure consisting of two subscales designed to assess positive affect (PA) and negative affect (NA). The current study employed the state version of the PANAS, which is sensitive to changes in affect resulting from experimental manipulation (McIntyre, Watson, Clark, & Cross, 1991). Items such as "Excited" are rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*very slightly or none at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). For the PA and NA subscales, higher scores indicate more positive and negative affect respectively. Internal consistency in this study for the PA subscale was  $\alpha = .91$  post-manipulation and  $\alpha = .90$  post-debriefing. Internal consistency for the NA subscale was  $\alpha = .86$  post-manipulation and  $\alpha = .84$  post-debriefing. The PANAS was administered as a manipulation check, and was used to verify the effectiveness of the debriefing, as will be explained in the "Procedure" section.

The State Self-Esteem Scale (SSES; Heatherton & Polivy, 1991) is a 20-item self-report measure designed to assess state changes in self-esteem. The SSES consists of three subscales designed to assess Performance, Social, and Appearance state self-esteem. All subscales are sensitive to changes resulting from experimental manipulation (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991). Items such as "I am pleased with my appearance right now" are scored on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). Higher scores indicate greater state self-esteem. Internal consistency in this study for the entire instrument was  $\alpha = .93$ .

The Body Image States Scale (BISS; Cash, Fleming, Alindogan, Steadman, & Whitehead, 2002) is a 6-item self-report measure of state changes in body satisfaction. The BISS is sensitive to changes in body satisfaction that occur as a result of experimental manipulation (Cash et al., 2002). Items such as "Right now I feel. . ." are scored on a 9-point scale ranging from negative (e.g., *extremely physically unattractive*) to positive (e.g., *extremely physically attractive*) body image states. Higher scores indicate greater state body satisfaction. Internal consistency in this study was  $\alpha = .84$ .

The Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II; Beck, Steer, Ball, & Ranieri, 1996) is a 21-item self-report measure of the severity of affective, cognitive, and neurovegetative symptoms of depression in adults. Items such as "Sadness" are scored on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 indicating absence of the symptom (e.g., *I do not feel*

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