



# Do These Norms Make Me Look Fat? The Effect of Exposure to Others' Body Preferences on Personal Body Ideals<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

In this study we examined the influence of normative body ideals in the form of perceived peer preferences on personal body ideals and body dissatisfaction. Participants ( $N = 146$  female college students) were exposed to the purported preferences of peers representing either relatively thin or heavy body ideals. Along with the normative body ideal manipulation, the gender of the purported peers was manipulated. Participants then selected their ideal for their own body and body dissatisfaction was measured. Women selected a thinner personal body ideal in the thin norm condition than in the heavy norm condition. This effect was seen irrespective of the gender of the purported peers. Body dissatisfaction was not influenced by the manipulation. The malleability of body image and the influence of social factors on ideal body size are discussed.

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## Introduction

In many cultures worldwide the drive for thinness is a norm that guides women's attitudes toward their bodies (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). According to the socio-cultural theory of body image (Strahan, Wilson, Cressman, & Buote, 2006; Sypeck, Gray, Etu, Ahrens, Mosiman, & Wiseman, 2006) "normative body ideals" (i.e., what other people think is most attractive or desirable) are communicated through the mass media (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Owen & Laurel-Seller, 2000) and are frequently reinforced by peers and family (Thompson et al., 1999) along with the implicit message that meeting these standards will lead to acceptance and success (Heinberg, 1996). The ideal female body represented in the media, while generally unattainable for most women (Wiseman, Gray, Mosiman, & Ahrens, 1992), can become internalized (Yamamiya, Cash, Melnyk, Posovac, & Posovac, 2005), leading women to aspire to body ideals that are unrealistic, and ultimately contributing to women's body dissatisfaction (Durkin & Paxton, 2002; Strahan et al., 2006). Indeed, research has

shown that North American women's ideal body weight is, on average, between thirteen and nineteen percent below their "normal" or medically ideal weight, suggesting that women's body ideals do not seem to be determined by medical recommendations for maximizing health (Owen & Laurel-Seller, 2000) as much as by perceptions of what is socially desirable.

The discrepancy between the body ideal to which women aspire and their actual body is a source of emotional and physical distress for many women and this body dissatisfaction can lead to attitudes and behaviors which diminish women's health and quality of life (Mills, McCabe, & Polivy, 1999; Stice & Shaw, 2002). It is important therefore that we seek methods to reduce this discrepancy. One such method is to change body ideals. If external socio-cultural influences guide body ideals, then changing social factors could lead to healthier body ideals (Jones, 2004; Stice & Whitenton, 2002). On the other hand, body ideals may have an evolutionary origin along with a biological function and therefore be resistant to change (Singh, Dixson, Jessop, Morgan, & Dixson, 2010).

## Are Body Ideals Malleable?

There is evidence to suggest that body image is malleable rather than static (Mills, Roosen, & Vella-Zarb, 2011; Mussap & Salton, 2006). For instance, short term exposure to an image of a thin body (versus a heavy body) resulted in women selecting a thinner personal body ideal (Glauert, Rhodes, Byrne, Fink, & Grammer,

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2009) and personal body ideals also shifted toward a thinner ideal in the context of thin (versus heavy) body cues (Wedell, Santoyo, & Pettibone, 2005). Owen and Spencer (2013) similarly found that participants chose a larger female body ideal after viewing average weight versus thin models. More recently, the influence of social context on body ideals has begun to be examined. Mills, Jadd, and Key (2012) found that when personal body ideals were influenced in the direction of a manipulated (thin versus heavy) “population average”; women wanted to be thinner when they believed that most other women were thinner.

In sum, evidence supports the socio-cultural theory of body image and demonstrates that exposure to very thin female body images in the media may influence women’s personal body ideals either through perceptual exposure, contextual cues, implicit endorsement of a thin ideal, or perceptions of normative body size averages. These shifts in body ideals, rather than being a perceptual phenomenon (see Mills, Polivy, Herman, & Tiggemann, 2002), may be due to the role of body image in our social context and the implicit social message that a thin body is attractive to other people. The current study addresses this possibility directly by examining the effect of peers’ purported normative body ideals on women’s self-reported ideals for their own bodies.

### The Influence of Peers on Body Image and Body Dissatisfaction

Along with media exposure, the influence of family and peers has also been implicated in the development of body dissatisfaction (Jones, 2004; Stice & Whitenton, 2002). Past research has demonstrated that the attitudes of peers toward appearance and weight influence body dissatisfaction and weight related behaviors (Gerner & Wilson, 2005; Hildebrandt, Shiovitz, Alfano, & Greif, 2008; Jones, 2004; Paxton, Schutz, Wertheim, & Muir, 1999; Paxton, Eisenberg, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2006; Stice, Maxfield, & Wells, 2003). Interpersonal relationships experienced during adolescence and early adulthood, are important in the development of body dissatisfaction (Holson, Jones, & Birkel, 2012) with internalization of thin ideals and social comparison acting as the mechanisms through which this influence occurs (Matera, Nerini, & Stefanile, 2013). Taken together, these findings provide strong evidence that peer groups act as enforcers of body ideals, focusing women on their bodies and the extent to which they deviate from group norms. In spite of this apparent link between peer influence and body ideals, no research to date has directly examined whether perceived peer preferences influence women’s body ideals. The current research attempts to fill this gap.

### Normative Social Influence and Body Ideals

Although the effect of normative body ideals on personal body ideals has not been previously experimentally manipulated, research has examined whether women’s ideals for their own bodies are a reflection of the body ideals of others. In the case of same-sex preferences, women’s personal body ideals have been found to diverge somewhat from other women’s actual preferences and converge instead with what they perceived to be preferred by other women, suggesting that women’s body ideals may represent an attempt to conform to the perceived preference of other women (Cohn & Adler, 1992; Jacobi & Cash, 1994). In the case of opposite-sex peers a similar pattern emerged (Cohn & Adler, 1992; Fallon & Rozin, 1985; Jacobi & Cash, 1994). Women’s personal body ideals converged with their perception of the female body men would prefer, suggesting that women may also adjust their body ideals to conform to the perceived preference of the opposite-sex (Cohn & Adler, 1992; Fallon & Rozin, 1985; Jacobi & Cash, 1994).

Cohn and Adler (1992) also found that women regarded thin figures as ideal almost unanimously and concluded that women perceived the female body ideal to be shared by both same- and opposite-sex peers. In support of this conclusion, Crossley, Cornelissen, and Tovee (2012), found that women and men’s ideal female body preferences converged, with both preferring a low BMI and a relatively curvy shape. These findings raise the question of whether female or male peer preferences have a greater impact on women’s body ideals.

There is indirect evidence that perceived opposite-sex preferences are an important source of influence on women’s personal body ideals (Molloy & Herzberger, 1998; Parker, Nichter, Nichter, Vukovic, Sims, & Ritenbaugh). Research has shown that Black men’s ideal female body is larger and more curvaceous than that of White men (Glasser, Robnett, & Feliciano, 2009; Jackson & McGill, 1996; Overstreet, Quinn, & Agocha, 2010; Thompson, Sargent, & Kemper, 1996), and this difference is reflected in Black and White women’s ideals for their own bodies and their differing levels of body satisfaction (Overstreet et al., 2010; Roberts, Cash, Feingold, & Johnson, 2006). Similarly, Franko et al. (2012) reported that Latino men have a larger female body ideal than White men and that Latino women felt their own bodies were more appreciated by Latino men. Based on these findings, the current study examined the influence of the purported preferences of both sexes on women’s body ideals.

### Normative Body Ideals and Body Dissatisfaction

Because very thin body ideals have been associated with body dissatisfaction, one might expect that a manipulation that influences women toward a more realistic body ideal might also reduce body dissatisfaction. Research by Halliwell and Dittmar (2004) supports this possibility. They found that after exposure to advertisements with thin models, women reported higher levels of body dissatisfaction than those exposed to average-sized models (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2004). It is also possible that higher levels of body dissatisfaction lead to the endorsement of smaller body ideals and that these ideals, in turn, are more difficult to challenge because of the existing high levels of body dissatisfaction and internalization of Western thinness ideals. The findings of both Glauert and colleagues (2009) and Wedell and colleagues (2005) support this possibility. In both studies, participants with high levels of body dissatisfaction and internalization of socio-cultural norms were less susceptible to the influence of the manipulated contextual and perceptual cues relating to body size. In the current study we test both of these possibilities.

### The Present Research

The first goal of the current research was to examine whether women’s personal body ideals are influenced by normative body ideals in the form of the purported preferences of peers. Based on the previous literature, women exposed to a thinner peer preference were predicted to report a thinner ideal than those exposed to a heavier peer preference. The second goal was to examine whether the gender of the source of the body preference has any differential influence on personal body ideals. Based on previous research (Cohn & Adler, 1992; Crossley et al., 2012; Jacobi & Cash, 1994) we hypothesized that both male and female peer preferences would influence personal body ideals. Finally, the third goal was to examine the influence of normative body ideals on women’s body dissatisfaction and to examine whether higher levels of body dissatisfaction could inhibit the influence of peer preference on women’s body ideals. Consistent with previous findings (Glauert et al., 2009; Wedell et al., 2005) we hypothesized that the personal body ideals of women with higher levels of body dissatisfaction would be less

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