

Peer Influences on the Body Satisfaction of Adolescent Girls: Where Do We Go from Here?

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Abstract

Although several researchers have examined the body satisfaction and body image of adolescent girls, little research has focused on specific peer influences. Because peers become more important during adolescence, this article aims to give a clear overview of ways in which peers influence the body satisfaction of adolescent girls. Body satisfaction is related to body image, which is part of self-image. Body dissatisfaction and a negative body image can lead to eating disorders. Recent research literature will be summarized. This literature can be categorized into three different components: appearance culture among friends, evaluation and acceptance. The limitations and importance of these results will be discussed, and directions for future research will be indicated.

Keywords: Body satisfaction; adolescent girls; peer influences; adolescence; appearance culture among friends; evaluation; acceptance

Introduction

Self-image has several characteristics and consists of multiple aspects. Body image is part of self-image. In adolescence, this body image becomes very important for most girls (Jones, 2002; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001; Phares, Steinberg, & Thompson, 2004; Vincent & McCabe, 2000). During adolescence, girls become more aware of their appearance and its consequences. The body image is partially developed in the context of social relationships with other people (Lieberman et al., 2001) and is associated with body satisfaction. Self-image, body image and body satisfaction are thus intertwined. As girls grow older, they become more dissatisfied with their body (Jones, Vigfusdottir, & Lee, 2004; Mellor, McCabe, Ricciardelli, & Merino, 2008; Tremblay & Lariviere, 2009; Vincent & McCabe, 2000). Body dissatisfaction contributes to a negative body image, which in turn can result in a distorted self-image and unhealthy behavior, such as eating problems (Hutchinson & Rapee, 2007; Jones et al., 2004; Lieberman, Gauvin, Bukowski, & White, 2001; Phares et al., 2004; Tremblay & Lariviere, 2009). Several factors are involved in the development of body satisfaction. First, there are individual risk factors, such as excessive or inadequate Body Mass Index (BMI), low self-esteem, and depression. Second, sociocultural factors are involved, such as family, media and peers (Hutchinson & Rapee, 2007; Mellor et al., 2008; Paxton, Schutz, Wertheim, & Muir, 1999). These sociocultural factors collectively comprise the Tripartite Influence Model (Keery, Van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004). Yet, relatively little attention has been given to

specific peer influences (Hutchinson & Rapee, 2007; Jones et al., 2004; Lieberman et al., 2001; Paxton et al., 1999; Shroff & Thompson, 2006). Therefore, this article will focus on the question as to the ways peers influence adolescent girls' body satisfaction, and thus their body image. Peers become more important in the lives of adolescent girls. They spend more time with their peers and value their attitudes, beliefs, and behavior. For that reason, this article investigates self-image with respect to body dissatisfaction and body image, within the social domain. The aim of this article is to give a clear overview of recent literature concerning the effects of peer influence on body satisfaction. For that reason, the literature will be summarized on the basis of the distinction used by Jones and Crawford (2006): appearance culture among friends, evaluation and acceptance. In addition, there will be a discussion of the importance of these results for intervention programs and society, as well as an exploration of the possibilities for future research.

Appearance culture among friends

The first component includes the appearance culture among friends. There is considerable evidence that friends are important contributors to the development of body image, which is an important part of one's self-image, especially during adolescence (Jones & Crawford, 2006; Paxton et al., 1999; Vincent & McCabe, 2000). To a great extent, relationships with friends are what comprise the daily social context of adolescent girls. Within friendship groups, there appears to be a "culture of appearance." This means that time is

spent on appearance issues which, when shared with friends contribute to body satisfaction and the development of body image of adolescent girls.

Although it is reported that direct peer influences rather than the quality of the relationship with peers are important (Vincent & McCabe, 2000), the quality of the relationship also appears to be importance significant factor (Jones et al., 2004). Direct influences include comments about appearance. Friends are peers with whom closer relationships are formed. These relationships are confidential, especially during adolescence. Conversations with friends contain a lot of information (Jones et al., 2004; Vincent & McCabe, 2000). An explanation of the importance of the quality of the relationship can be the susceptibility of the topic of appearance, which will only be discussed privately.

Friendship groups appear to be similar in behaviors and attitudes, independent of BMI (Paxton et al., 1999; Shroff & Thompson, 2006). As such, friends' extreme weight loss behavior is a predictor of a girl's individual extreme weight loss behavior (Paxton et al., 1999; Hutchinson & Rapee, 2006). Furthermore, friends' concerns with thinness are a risk factor for body dissatisfaction (Paxton et al., 1999). Girls are more dissatisfied with their bodies when their friends are dissatisfied with their own bodies, rather than when they are encouraged to lose weight (Lieberman et al., 2001). Thus, perception of friends' eating behaviors and body satisfaction influence the body satisfaction and eating behaviors of girls.

Adolescent girls form friendship groups in which there is high similarity on body image concern and weight-loss behaviors. Girls within such groups talk more about weight loss and dieting, compare their bodies with others, and are also teased more frequently about their weight and shape, than adolescent girls from friendship groups in which there is low similarity on body image concern and weight-loss behaviors. In addition, girls from these friendship groups think friends are important in influencing their decisions to diet, and they perceive their friends to be more preoccupied with dieting and weight loss (Paxton et al., 1999; Shroff & Thompson, 2006). However, other research did not find similarity on attitudes within groups (Hutchinson & Rapee, 2006). This finding thus contradicts the research of Paxton and colleagues (1999) and Shroff and Thompson (2006). Further research is needed to clarify this issue.

Moreover, caution is required, because an alternative explanation to socialization is *selection* (Paxton et al., 1999). It is possible that adolescent girls are already similar to each other. They may affiliate with groups they already have things in common with instead of becoming gradually similar through their daily interactions.

Despite these criticisms, conversations with friends about appearance issues, such as weight, influence the attitudes and behaviors of adolescent girls. In general, these conversations are positive or neutral (Jones et al., 2004). The more conversations with friends about appearance one has, the likelier one becomes dissatisfied with one's body and develops a negative body image. This negative body image can be destructive of one's self-image. This relationship between conversations about appearance with friends and a negative body image is partially mediated through internalization of the thinness ideal (Jones & Crawford, 2006; Jones et al., 2004; Keery et al., 2004; Lieberman et al., 2001; Shroff & Thompson, 2006). Adolescent girls internalize the values and beliefs of their friends during conversations. This raises a social norm and appearance ideals. The more conversations about appearance one has, the more one internalizes the appearance ideals (Jones & Crawford, 2006). When one does not meet with these appearance standards, one can develop a negative body image (Jones et al., 2004; Lieberman et al., 2001; Paxton et al., 1999). Furthermore, through conversations about appearance, adolescent girls seem to compare themselves with one another. This increases the chance of body dissatisfaction and of a negative body image (Keery et al., 2004; Shroff & Thompson, 2006). This latter is part of one's self-image. No relationship was found between BMI and conversations with friends about appearance. However, older adolescent girls have conversations more often than younger ones (Jones and Crawford (2006).

Besides conversations with friends about appearance, adolescent girls appear to talk with their friends about dieting (Jones & Crawford, 2006; Paxton et al., 1999; Vincent & McCabe, 2000). These conversations also influence attitudes and behaviors. The more conversations adolescent girls have about dieting, the likelier they are to be dissatisfied with their body and to develop a negative body image in that way (Jones & Crawford, 2006). However, an individual risk factor is involved as well. A relationship exists between BMI and conversations about dieting

(Jones & Crawford, 2006; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001). In addition, girls with a high BMI diet most often and use more extreme methods (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001). Likewise, older adolescent girls have conversations with friends about dieting more often (Jones et al., 2006). Internalization (Jones & Crawford, 2006; Keery et al., 2004; Shroff & Thompson, 2006) and comparison partially mediate the relationship between conversations about dieting and body dissatisfaction (Keery et al., 2004; Shroff & Thompson, 2006).

In sum, friends influence the body satisfaction of adolescent girls in multiple ways. First, similarity within a friendship group on attitudes and behaviors is reported in some investigations, but not in others. Thus, further investigation is necessary. Further, the more adolescent girls have conversations about appearance and dieting with friends, the more they are dissatisfied with their body and the likelier they are to develop a negative body image. Internalization and comparison partially mediate these relationships.

Evaluation

The second component involves evaluation. Adolescent girls think they are being evaluated on the basis of their appearance. A negative evaluation is especially associated with body dissatisfaction (Jones, 2002; Jones & Crawford, 2006) and thus with a negative body image. One's body image is part of one's self-image. This evaluation takes several forms. Below, criticism, pressure, encouragement and teasing will be discussed.

First of all, peers criticize. Although adolescent girls experience little criticism of their appearance, research shows that the criticism that is experienced has a substantial negative effect on the body satisfaction of adolescent girls (Jones et al., 2004; Padilla-Walker & Bean, 2009). Dissatisfaction with one's body is closely associated with receiving critical comments about one's appearance (Jones et al., 2004; Lieberman et al., 2001; Tremblay & Lariviere, 2009). Besides this direct effect, adolescent girls internalize appearance ideals through criticism of their appearance (Jones et al., 2004; Shroff & Thompson, 2006).

Another influence is the pressure to lose weight exerted by peers. This is associated with body dissatisfaction and with strategies to lose weight, and it can have devastating long-term consequences (Hutchinson & Rapee, 2007; Jones &

Crawford, 2006; Tremblay & Lariviere, 2009). Research conducted among Chilean adolescents, however, showed no significant relationship between peer pressure and body dissatisfaction, on the one hand, and strategies to lose weight, on the other (Mellor et al., 2008). A cultural explanation may be responsible for this inconsistency. In Chile, adolescents are more under the influence of families than peers. This raises the question as to whether there are cultural differences in peer influences on body satisfaction and in that way on body image. Furthermore, and not noted in the studies referenced here (Hutchinson & Rapee, 2007; Jones & Crawford, 2006; Tremblay & Lariviere, 2009) is the possibility that adolescent girls, who already have a negative body image, experience pressure from their environment more intensely than adolescent girls who have a more positive body image. Nevertheless, this experience is important to consider.

Besides pressure, encouragement to lose weight has been indicated as contributing to body dissatisfaction. This encouragement can result in eating problems (Lieberman et al., 2001; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001; Vincent & McCabe, 2000). Not much data has been reported about such encouragement, perhaps because of its low reported frequency. It is important, however, to also examine this encouragement, because it can lead to unhealthy behaviors.

Furthermore, peers can tease adolescent girls. When teasing is perceived as hurtful, it has a significant effect on body satisfaction (Lieberman et al., 2001) and, in the long term, on the eating behaviors of adolescent girls (Hutchinson & Rapee, 2007; Jones & Crawford, 2006; Lieberman et al., 2001; Paxton et al., 1999; Tremblay & Lariviere, 2009; Vincent & McCabe, 2000). Besides being teased about appearance in general, one can be teased about weight and body shape. Teasing about weight may be most directly related to ways of losing weight (Jones & Crawford, 2006). As a result of being teased, adolescent girls internalize social norms and become dissatisfied with their body when they do not meet externally imposed standards (Jones & Crawford, 2006; Shroff & Thompson, 2006). Adolescent girls with a high BMI are more likely to be victims of appearance teasing (Jones & Crawford, 2006). Nevertheless, independent of BMI, adolescent girls can witness teasing and learn in the same way. Through this vicarious teasing, they internalize social norms (Jones & Crawford, 2006).

In sum, evaluation by peers can have effects on the body satisfaction and body image of adolescent girls. This body image forms part of one's self-image. Although not frequently observed, appearance criticism has a direct as well as an indirect effect, through internalization of social norms, on body satisfaction. Furthermore, pressure to lose weight contributes to body dissatisfaction and the formulation of specific strategies to lose weight. In addition, encouragement to lose weight, and both direct and vicarious teasing seem to be ways in which peers influence the body dissatisfaction of adolescent girls. Both direct and vicarious teasing are mediated through internalization. However, teasing about weight has the most direct effect on body dissatisfaction. Direct teasing, but not vicarious teasing, happens most often when a girl has a high BMI.

Acceptance

Acceptance by peers is very important for adolescent girls. Some girls think they would be more accepted if they were thinner. These girls have strong body dissatisfaction (Jones & Crawford, 2006; Lieberman et al., 2001). The desire to belong to a group and to be accepted exerts indirect pressure on girls to undertake actions that will lead to greater acceptance. Jones and Crawford (2006) call this appearance-based acceptance. Adolescent girls are likely to base acceptance on their appearance, specifically when they have a high BMI. Through internalization of social norms, comparison, and peer suppression of feelings, appearance-based acceptance is linked to body dissatisfaction (Shroff & Thompson, 2006). What this means is that girls tend to keep quiet about certain topics as a result of anxiety about being rejected by peers. However, Schroff and Thompson (2006) do not mention anything about the characteristics of the peers. It seems reasonable that if one wants to be accepted by certain peers, one ascribes importance to those peers. Further research should focus on this issue.

Adolescent girls frequently compare their bodies with those of their peers (Jones & Crawford, 2006; Paxton et al., 1999) on the basis of weight and height (Jones, 2002). It is mainly weight that is the object of comparison, and that has the strongest relationship with body dissatisfaction. Insecurity is related to comparison (Jones, 2002). Adolescent girls think that popularity and acceptance are mainly determined by physical characteristics.

Popularity and acceptance are important issues during adolescence. By comparing, adolescent girls internalize social norms. Thus, these comparisons have great impact on the evaluation of one's own body and on one's body satisfaction. Older adolescent girls compare their bodies more often than young adolescent girls (Jones & Crawford, 2006). The more a girl compares herself with her peers, the more she becomes dissatisfied with her body (Jones, 2002). In addition, girls with high BMI are likely to compare themselves with their peers (Jones & Crawford, 2006). However, it is important to note that these comparisons coincide with other peer influences, for instance conversations about dieting (Paxton et al., 1999).

Peers also serve as role models (Lieberman et al., 2001; Paxton et al., 1999; Vincent & McCabe, 2000). Peers can model behaviors which are copied (Lieberman et al., 2001). Thus, adolescent girls often think they should lose weight because their friends do so (Hutchinson & Rapee, 2007; Mackey & La Greca, 2007; Padilla-Walker & Bean, 2009).

In sum, acceptance by peers is important for adolescent girls. The more adolescent girls connect acceptance with appearance, the more they are dissatisfied with their bodies. Furthermore, the higher the BMI, the more likely they ascribe acceptance to appearance. The same is true for comparing. This relationship between appearance-based acceptance and body dissatisfaction can be explained in terms of internalization, comparison and peer suppression of feelings. The relationship between comparisons and body dissatisfaction is mediated through internalization.

Discussion

The aim of this article was to summarize recent research literature in order to provide a complete picture of peer influences on the body satisfaction of adolescent girls. Body satisfaction is directly related to body image. In turn, body image is part of one's self-image. Central to this article is the question as to the ways peers influence the body satisfaction—and thus body image—of adolescent girls.

Peers influence the body dissatisfaction of adolescent girls through daily interaction. The term *peer appearance culture* can be divided into three components: appearance culture among friends, evaluation and acceptance. The first component is appearance culture among friends. Some researchers report similarity within friendship

groups, but others do not (Hutchinson & Rapee, 2006; Paxton et al., 1999; Shroff & Thompson, 2006). This component consists of conversations about appearance and conversations about how to diet. Internalization and comparison partially served as mediating factors between the conversations and body dissatisfaction. The individual factor of BMI was related to conversations about dieting, but not to conversations about appearance (Jones & Crawford, 2006; Jones et al., 2004; Keery et al., 2004; Lieberman et al., 2001; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001; Padilla-Walker & Bean, 2009; Paxton et al., 1999; Shroff & Thompson, 2006; Vincent & McCabe, 2000).

The second component, evaluation, consists of criticism, pressure to lose weight, encouragement to lose weight, and both direct and vicarious teasing. Criticism of appearance is directly as well as indirectly linked, through internalization, to body satisfaction. Pressure to lose weight is positively related to body dissatisfaction and strategies to lose weight. In addition, pressure to attain an “ideal” appearance, encouragement to lose weight, and both direct and vicarious teasing all seem to be positively associated with body dissatisfaction. Both teasing and vicarious teasing seem to be mediated through internalization. However, teasing about weight seems to be most directly associated with body dissatisfaction. Furthermore, the individual factor of BMI is positively correlated with teasing (Hutchinson & Rapee, 2007; Jones, 2002; Jones & Crawford, 2006; Lieberman et al., 2001; Tremblay & Lariviere, 2009).

According to the third component, acceptance, peers can exercise influence through appearance-based acceptance and comparisons. Peers can also model behaviors. Both appearance-based acceptance and comparisons are positively associated with body dissatisfaction. Internalization, comparison and peer suppression of feelings are mediators between appearance-based acceptance and body dissatisfaction. Furthermore BMI is an important determinant of appearance-based acceptance. The link between comparisons and body dissatisfaction is mediated through internalization. In addition, BMI has been identified as a relevant factor (Hutchinson & Rapee, 2007; Jones, 2002; Jones & Crawford, 2006; Lieberman et al., 2001; Mackey & La Greca, 2007; Padilla-Walker & Bean, 2009; Paxton et al., 1999; Shroff & Thompson, 2006; Vincent & McCabe, 2000)

It can be concluded that peers exert diverse influences on the body satisfaction of adolescent girls. Internalization and comparing appear to mediate many of the various influential factors. Interventions should therefore target these mediators in order to prevent formation of a negative body image among adolescent girls, body dissatisfaction, and perhaps eating disorders (Keery et al., 2004). However, influence upon adolescent girls with respect to their body image is hardly limited to peers. Other sociocultural factors, such as family and media, are also relevant. Thus, all aspects of the Tripartite Influence Model should be taken into account. Moreover, not every adolescent girl will develop a significant degree of body dissatisfaction or eating disorders as the result of peer influences. Individual risk factors should also be examined. For instance, BMI and the importance an individual girl ascribes to the opinion of her friends can be involved. Nevertheless, peer influences should be seriously taken into account. That is the reason why specialized interventions should target peers.

Still, there are some limitations of the research that have been discussed. The investigations were not longitudinal. Therefore, no causal links can be identified. Moreover, questionnaires were used, and therefore only the influence that was reported by the girls was identified. However, this influence is important (Padilla-Walker & Bean, 2009). Some criticize socialization processes, because it appears that adolescents chose friends on the basis of what they have in common. This is called *selection*. (Hutchinson & Rapee, 2007; Mackey, La Greca, 2007; Paxton et al., 1999; Vincent & McCabe, 2000).

Besides negative influences, the positive influences of peers and friends should also be taken into account. For instance, a friend, who is not overly preoccupied with his or her weight can serve as a protective factor. Furthermore, the possibility of two different pathways exists: one for negative influences and one for positive ones (Shroff & Thompson, 2006).

Future research should address the unresolved issues. First, peer influences should be longitudinally investigated in order to explain causal links. Second, it appears that peers influence the body dissatisfaction of girls even before adolescence (Phares et al., 2004). Further research is needed. Third, differences dependent on ethnicity have been found (Mellor et al., 2008). This could

form a future research direction. Fourth, differences between the influences of male peers and female peers could be investigated (Lieberman et al., 2001). Fifth, Paxton and colleagues (1999) presume, on the basis of their research, an effect of the position of a girl within the group. This is a variable that could be examined in future research. Sixth, Hutchinson and Rapee (2006) did not find similarities with respect to body image concern within groups. This finding contrasts with the research of Paxton et al. (1999) and Shroff and Thompson (2006). Further research in this regard is therefore needed.

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