Comparing to perfection: How cultural norms for appearance affect social comparisons and self-image

Erin J. Strahan *, Anne E. Wilson, Kate E. Cressman, Vanessa M. Buote

Wilfrid Laurier University, Brantford Campus, 73 George Street, Brantford, Ont., Canada N3T 2Y3

Abstract

Theory and research suggests that cultural norms for appearance present unrealistic standards of beauty which may contribute to women’s body dissatisfaction. In Study 1, women described their appearance more negatively than men and made more upward social comparisons about their bodies, but not about other domains. Women also compared more than men with unrealistic targets (e.g., models). In Study 2, we explored the role of cultural norms for appearance in social comparisons with relevant (peer) or irrelevant (model) superior targets. When cultural norms were not salient, participants judged a peer to be more relevant, compared more with the peer and felt worse after exposure to the peer. However, when cultural norms were salient, participants judged a professional model to be equally relevant, compared more with the model and felt worse after exposure to the model. We discuss the powerful role of cultural norms in determining social comparison processes and self-appraisals.

Keywords: Cultural norms; Social comparisons; Body image; Gender differences

Introduction

It is a well-documented finding that most women feel dissatisfied with their bodies (Smolak, 2006). A Canadian health survey revealed that 85–90% of women dislike their bodies (University of Alberta Health Centre, 2001). Women report lower body satisfaction (Aruguete, Yates, & Edman, 2006), are more likely to diet (Polivy & Herman, 1983), and have higher rates of eating disorders (Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1984) than men do. Even women who know they are not overweight often express a desire to lose weight (Connor-Greene, 1988). In fact, females’ dissatisfaction with their bodies is so widespread that some theorists refer to it as a “normative discontent” (Rodin et al., 1984). This dissatisfaction is evident throughout a woman’s life span (Pliner, Chaiken, & Flett, 1990), with girls as young as 9 indicating a desire to lose weight (Schur, Sanders, & Steiner, 2000).

Cultural norms for thinness and beauty

Theorists speculate that cultural norms for thinness and beauty play a large role in women’s chronic dissatisfaction with their bodies (Thompson, 1992; Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). They believe that the message that women need to be thin and attractive to be accepted in our society largely comes from the media (Fallon, 1990; Kilbourne, 1994; Wolf, 1991). Indeed, images of thin women are ubiquitous in the media, and women’s magazines contain more messages about physical attractiveness than do men’s magazines (e.g., Malkin, Wornian, & Chrisler, 1999). Images and messages conveying cultural norms for weight and appearance are pervasive and arguably very salient to women.
The average American woman is 5’4” tall and weighs 140 pounds, whereas the average American model is 5’11” tall and weighs 117 pounds (National Eating Disorders Association, 2002). Fashion models are thinner than 98% of American women (Smolak, 2002). In addition, the cultural ideal of attractiveness among women has increased in thinness over time (Wiseman, Gray, Mosimann, & Ahrens, 1992), whereas the average weight of North American women has not reflected this trend (Spitzer, Henderson, & Zivian, 1999). Clearly, the standards of physical attractiveness set by models and celebrities are unrealistic for the average woman to strive for.

Although women must fit into a narrowly defined category of physical attractiveness (i.e., young, tall, thin; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2004), the cultural norms for men are more flexible and relaxed. There are many different types of men (with different physical characteristics) that are depicted in the media and that women view as attractive (Humphreys & Paxton, 2004). Consequently, although the “ideal male” may be viewed as muscular and athletic, men may fit a variety of categories and still be accepted and viewed as attractive.

Thompson and his colleagues have developed a sociocultural model which suggests that the extent to which women internalize the largely unattainable societal standards for thinness will have a big impact on their body satisfaction (Thompson, 1992; Thompson et al., 1999). For example, Heinberg and Thompson (1995) found that when women were exposed to thin media images, women high in sociocultural internalization became more depressed and more dissatisfied with their bodies whereas women low in sociocultural internalization did not. In addition, Stice, Mazotti, Weibel, and Agras (2000) had women who were high in internalization of the thin-ideal participate in a dissonance-based intervention in which they voluntarily argued against the value of the thin-ideal in our society. They found that these women internalized the ideal to a lesser degree following the intervention and they also showed increases in body satisfaction and decreases in dieting behavior. In sum, theory and research suggest that sociocultural norms for ideal appearance play an important role in people’s, particularly women’s, assessments of their bodies.

Positive illusions

The widespread nature of women’s negative evaluations of their bodies is particularly striking in the context of research on positive illusions which reveals an equally widespread tendency for people to perceive their attributes in very positive terms (Baumeister, 1998; Taylor & Brown, 1988). For example, research has shown that the majority of people think that they are above-average drivers (Svenson, 1981), the majority of college professors believe they do above-average work (Cross, 1977) and college students judge their personality traits to be superior to the average college student (Alicke, 1985).

Although people appear to engage in these self-enhancing processes for most domains in life, we argue that for women, the domain of weight and appearance may be an exception to this general rule. If they self-deprecate rather than self-enhance when describing their weight and appearance, this may contribute to their feelings of body dissatisfaction. Other researchers have suggested that women may avoid making self-enhancing descriptions when describing their weight. Powell, Matacin, and Stuart (2001) asked participants to rate their feelings about their own body and rate their feelings about an average student’s body. Men rated themselves higher on body-esteem than they rated other men, but women did not exhibit such self-serving evaluations of their bodies. In addition, although participants generally showed a typical self-enhancement tendency to value their good qualities more than their flaws, women failed to self-enhance in this manner when evaluating their weight. This suggests that people’s usually robust ability to protect themselves from threat and to feel good about themselves falls apart for women when they evaluate their bodies. We propose that the strong tendency to self-enhance in most domains (e.g., Baumeister, 1998) is countered by the equally strong message, aimed at women, that their physical appearance will never measure up to the high standards set by the media. It may be that cultural norms clearly communicate to women that even if they do not judge themselves by this standard, others will. This message may render the typical strategies for self-flattery ineffective.

Social comparison theory

Not only do women’s self-evaluations of their weight and appearance counter the literature on self-enhancement, they are also somewhat out of step with the equally large literature on social comparison theory. First, women’s reactions are inconsistent with the literature that suggests that people often prefer downward comparisons with inferior others because they are self-protective or self-enhancing (Gibbons & McCoy, 1991; Wills, 1981; Wood, 1989). For example, Wills...
argued that people whose self-esteem is threatened choose to socially compare with others who are thought to be worse off. This would suggest that women threatened by unrealistic norms in the media should be particularly motivated to compare themselves to people who are less attractive than they are. Of course, people are not always motivated by self-enhancement concerns; people may choose upward comparisons when motivated by self-improvement goals or lateral comparisons when motivated by affiliation goals (Taylor, Neter, & Wayment, 1995). However, at least for self-enhancement goals, it appears that downward social comparisons are typically preferred (Wilson & Ross, 2000).

In addition, social comparison researchers have found that people make comparisons with relevant others, but avoid making comparisons with irrelevant others. For example, an executive may compare her salary with that of a colleague but would avoid comparing her salary with that of a part-time McDonald's employee. The first comparison is rich with diagnostic information about her own salary, whereas the latter comparison is not (Festinger, 1954; Wood, 1989). When comparison targets are deemed irrelevant, they should not have an impact on the self. Lockwood and Kunda (1997) demonstrated that when people were presented with a threatening, but irrelevant comparison target (e.g., future teachers read about a highly successful accountant), this did not impact their self-views. In addition, they found that people often take poetic license with the perceived relevance of comparison targets, usually in a self-serving manner. When participants were presented with a threatening, but obviously relevant comparison target (i.e., a highly successful student in their year and program), they often went out of their way to describe how the target was irrelevant for the purposes of comparison.

According to social comparison theory, an average woman should view professional models and celebrities as irrelevant comparison targets. The fashion industry spends millions of dollars to beautify models for a photo shoot, and the finished product is further perfected with touch-ups and airbrushing (Wolf, 1991). Logically, models and celebrities should be just as irrelevant for an average woman to compare to as Bill Gates would be for the average McDonald’s employee to compare to.

Cash, Cash, and Butters (1983) showed some evidence that women may less readily compare to professional models than those who they see as more similar to them. They exposed women to pictures of either attractive models, and manipulated the model’s relevance by including the advertising logo (e.g., Calvin Klein) on the image or presenting the model alone without an explicit indication of her status as a professional. They expected that, consistent with social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), women would only compare with the models that they saw as similar or relevant to them and not to the explicitly “professional” model. They found that when women compared to the attractive “non-professional” model, their self-ratings of attractiveness were lower than when they compared to the attractive professional model.

However, others have suggested that professional models are not always deemed irrelevant (Heinberg & Thompson, 1992, 1995). For example, women who are high in body image disturbance or who internalize the sociocultural norms for attractiveness feel badly after comparing to professional models presumably because they judge these models as relevant comparison standards (Heinberg & Thompson, 1995). We argue that just as individual differences may moderate the degree to which people are influenced by professional models, the context in which people are exposed to these images may also matter. Specifically, when messages conveying cultural norms of attractiveness are particularly salient, people will not dismiss the professional model as irrelevant for the purposes of comparison. Models and celebrities are powerful examples of the cultural norms for thinness and beauty in our society. Because the average woman knows that she will be judged according to these cultural norms, images which reflect this norm may not be dismissed as irrelevant. In addition, women may misjudge the attainability of the standard, especially since the cultural norm often implies that weight and appearance are highly controllable.

There is some research to support the idea that women engage in social comparison processes that are damaging to the self in the domain of weight and appearance (Martin & Kennedy, 1993; Patrick, Neighbors, & Knee, 2004; Tiggemann & McGill, 2004; Tiggemann & Slater, 2003). In focus-groups and surveys, women report comparing to models and wishing they resembled them (Richins, 1991). Women rate their appearance more negatively after being exposed to an extremely attractive comparison target (Birkeland et al., 2005; Brown, Novick, Lord, & Richards, 1992). In addition, mediation analyses reveal that exposure to media images leads women to engage in more social comparisons, which in turn leads to negative mood and body dissatisfaction (Tiggemann and McGill, 2004). Although it is clear from this research that social comparisons with media images can influence women’s self-views, these studies were not...
designed to systematically compare the degree to which people compare with professional models versus other targets, such as peers.

In sum, we propose that there are three major ways in which women’s evaluations of their bodies are inconsistent with other literatures in psychology. First, they are far more self-deprecating than the positive illusions literature would suggest. Second, women judge themselves against upward and often irrelevant comparison targets, whereas people often select self-enhancing downward targets and relevant comparisons. Finally, women overestimate the relevance of threatening comparison targets, while the past literature suggests that people typically downgrade the relevance of threatening comparisons.

Overview of studies

The purpose of the first study is to investigate whether women’s appearance comparisons might contribute to their feelings of body dissatisfaction. In this study, men and women described their weight and body shape in an open-ended fashion. They also described their social skills as a non-appearance control. We examine the valence of people’s self-descriptions and the direction of their social comparisons. We also examine choice of comparison targets to determine people’s preference for relevant and realistic versus unrealistic targets (e.g., peers versus models). This study allows us to examine how men and women spontaneously describe their bodies in the absence of controlled laboratory stimuli. We expect a typical self-enhancing pattern of results when participants describe their social skills, for both women and men (Baumeister, 1998). In contrast, we expect that relative to men, women will be more negative and more likely to compare with superior others when evaluating their bodies. Finally, we expect that females will be more likely to spontaneously compare to unrealistic targets such as models.

We argue that this gender difference does not reflect any qualities inherent to women, but rather occurs because of the pervasiveness of cultural norms for appearance that apply predominantly to women (Thompson et al., 1999).

In Study 2, we want to experimentally test the proposal that gender differences in evaluation of appearance arise because of differences in the salience of cultural norms for appearance which lead women to measure themselves against irrelevant, upward comparison targets and diminishes their evaluations of appearance. In everyday life women are bombarded with messages about cultural norms for appearance to a greater extent than are men. However, under circumstances where men and women are equally confronted with messages reflecting these norms, we expect that the “natural” gender difference will be attenuated or eliminated. Therefore, in this study, we manipulate exposure to cultural norms pertaining to appearance, then examine men and women’s reactions to either relevant or irrelevant superior comparison targets.

Study 1

Method

Participants

Participants were 112 Introductory Psychology undergraduates at Wilfrid Laurier University (80 females and 32 males), recruited through the psychology research participant pool. Mean age was 19.4 years ($SD = 2.28$). All participants received one experimental credit for their participation, which could be applied toward their psychology course grade.

Procedure

Participants were brought to the lab for a study on self-narratives. They were told that we were interested in how they describe themselves on various attributes. Participants were asked to write a description of both their weight and body shape and their social skills, presented in counterbalanced order. We used open-ended instructions drawn from Wilson and Ross (2000) in which participants were told that they could describe themselves in comparison to other people, or compared to what they were like in the past, or what they expect it to be like in the future. They were told that they should feel free to use or disregard any of these suggestions. Next, participants completed a second questionnaire asking them to list individuals or groups with whom they most often compared in the domains of weight and appearance, and social skills. Participants were then fully debriefed, probed for suspicion, and thanked.

Coding procedure

Two research assistants coded the open-ended descriptions for positive statements, negative statements, upward social comparisons, and downward social comparisons. A statement was considered positive if it was purely positive in nature (e.g., “I
am happy about how I look”; “I think my body is in good shape”). A statement was considered negative if it was purely negative in nature (e.g., “I really don’t like my thighs”; “I am very awkward socially”). The social comparison coding scheme was drawn from Wilson and Ross (2000). A self-appraisal statement was considered a social comparison if it referred to other people. Upward social comparisons referred to targets who were superior to oneself (e.g., “I’m not as attractive as my peers”), whereas downward social comparisons referred to people who were inferior to oneself (e.g., “I have better social skills than my roommate”). Inter-rater reliability (Cohen’s kappa) ranged from 0.76 to 0.85.

Results and discussion

Positive and negative statements

We predicted that females would describe their weight and body shape more negatively than males would, but would not differ from males in their assessment of social skills. A three-way mixed ANOVA with Attribute Type (social skills versus appearance) and valence (positive versus negative statements) as repeated measures and gender as the between-participants factor revealed that people generally made more positive statements ($M = 3.48$, $SE = 0.24$) than negative statements ($M = 0.96$, $SE = 0.15$), $F (1, 113) = 75.08$, $p < 0.0001$. In addition, they made more statements about their social skills ($M = 2.96$, $SE = 0.18$) than statements about their appearance ($M = 1.48$, $SE = 0.15$), $F (1, 113) = 63.41$, $p < 0.0001$. A Valence × Attribute Type interaction, $F (1, 113) = 55.38$, $p = 0.0001$, revealed that people reported significantly more positive social skills attributes ($M = 5.14$, $SE = 0.35$) than appearance attributes ($M = 1.81$, $SE = 0.24$), $F (1, 113) = 4.69$, $p = 0.03$, but equal numbers of negative attributes across both domains, $F (1, 113) < 1.7$, $ns$. These effects were qualified by a significant Attribute Type × Valence × Gender interaction, $F (1, 113) = 3.91$, $p = 0.05$. As can be seen in Fig. 1, men described their social skills much more positively than negatively, $r(31) = -2.97$, $p = 0.006$, but women reported equal numbers of positive and negative attributes, $t < 1$, $p = 0.82$. Thus, when describing their social skills, participants showed the usual self-enhancing tendencies, but when describing their weight and body shape, only men showed this tendency.

Social comparisons

We also predicted that females would make more upward social comparisons when describing their weight and body shape, whereas men would make more downward comparisons. An Attribute Type × Valence × Gender mixed ANOVA revealed a significant three-way interaction, $F (1, 113) = 6.32$, $p = 0.01$. Men did not differ in the number of upward and downward comparisons made when describing their social skills, $t(31) = -1.0$, $p = 0.33$, and neither did women, $t < 1$, $p > 0.8$. However, when describing their appearance, men made more downward ($M = 0.19$, $SD = 0.54$) than upward comparisons ($M = 0.00$, $SD = 0.00$), $t(31) = 1.98$, $p = 0.06$, $d = 0.50$, whereas women made significantly more upward ($M = 0.19$, $SD = 0.83$) than downward comparisons ($M = 0.00$, $SD = 0.00$), $t(82) = -2.11$, $p = 0.04$, $d = 0.32$. It is important to note that overall people were not making a substantial number of spontaneous comparisons, but when they did make comparisons the pattern was abundantly clear.

Relation between appraisal valence and social comparisons

We also examined correlations between the number of social comparisons made and overall positive and negative self-evaluations in each domain. As shown in Table 1, the more upward social comparisons males and
females made about social skills, the more negative self-descriptive statements they reported. In addition, the more downward appearance social comparisons men made, the more positive statements they made about their body, whereas for women, the more upward social comparisons they made, the more negative statements they made about their body.

Comparison targets

In addition to coding social comparison statements in the open-ended self-descriptions, we also asked participants to identify any people/groups with whom they often compare. Participants listed between one and eight targets, which were categorized as celebrities, models, professional athletes, friends/peers, acquaintances, strangers, and parents/family. First, we summed the number of comparisons listed and conducted a 2 (Attribute Type) x 2 (Gender) mixed-design ANOVA. A significant main effect for Attribute Type, $F(1, 113) = 8.49$, $p = 0.004$, indicated that participants made significantly more comparisons about their appearance ($M = 3.41$, $SE = 0.18$) than their social skills ($M = 2.87$, $SE = 0.17$). A marginal main effect for gender, $F(1, 113) = 3.74$, $p = 0.056$, indicated that women made more comparisons overall ($M = 3.43$, $SE = 0.16$) than men ($M = 2.84$, $SE = 0.26$). These were both qualified by a significant interaction between Attribute Type and Gender, $F(1, 113) = 5.04$, $p = 0.03$. Men and women reported the same number of social skills comparisons, $F < 1$, ns, but women ($M = 3.92$, $SE = 0.19$) reported significantly more body comparisons than men ($M = 2.91$, $SE = 0.31$), $F(1, 113) = 7.57$, $p = 0.007$.

We also wanted to examine gender differences in specific comparison targets listed. We conducted a series of Attribute Type x Gender ANOVAs with mean number of comparisons made within each category as the dependent variables (Table 2). We found that both

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute domain</th>
<th>Social skills</th>
<th>Appearance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Upward</td>
<td>Downward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive self-statements</td>
<td>$-0.10$</td>
<td>$0.08$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative self-statements</td>
<td>$0.22^*$</td>
<td>$-0.08$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive self-statements</td>
<td>$-0.07$</td>
<td>$-$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative self-statements</td>
<td>$0.43^{**}$</td>
<td>$-$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Empty cells refer to cases where the mean number of responses was 0.00 for one of the variables.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

Table 1
Correlations between social comparisons and self-appraisal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Upward</td>
<td>Downward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive self-statements</td>
<td>$0.10$</td>
<td>$0.08$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative self-statements</td>
<td>$0.22^*$</td>
<td>$-0.08$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive self-statements</td>
<td>$-0.07$</td>
<td>$-$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative self-statements</td>
<td>$0.43^{**}$</td>
<td>$-$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A significant main effect for Attribute Type, $F(1, 113) = 8.49$, $p = 0.004$, indicated that participants made significantly more comparisons about their appearance ($M = 3.41$, $SE = 0.18$) than their social skills ($M = 2.87$, $SE = 0.17$). A marginal main effect for gender, $F(1, 113) = 3.74$, $p = 0.056$, indicated that women made more comparisons overall ($M = 3.43$, $SE = 0.16$) than men ($M = 2.84$, $SE = 0.26$). These were both qualified by a significant interaction between Attribute Type and Gender, $F(1, 113) = 5.04$, $p = 0.03$. Men and women reported the same number of social skills comparisons, $F < 1$, ns, but women ($M = 3.92$, $SE = 0.19$) reported significantly more body comparisons than men ($M = 2.91$, $SE = 0.31$), $F(1, 113) = 7.57$, $p = 0.007$.

We also wanted to examine gender differences in specific comparison targets listed. We conducted a series of Attribute Type x Gender ANOVAs with mean number of comparisons made within each category as the dependent variables (Table 2). We found that both
women and men compared more to relevant targets such as friends, parents/family, and acquaintances (coworkers, classmates, etc.) when evaluating their social skills than their appearance. Women also compared more to friends overall than did men. Interestingly, several target categories revealed significant Attribute Type × Gender interactions. Women reported comparing more to models, celebrities, strangers and professional athletes when evaluating their appearance than when evaluating their social skills. In contrast, men reported relatively similar numbers of comparisons across attribute types with the exception of professional athletes whom they mentioned more when evaluating their appearance than their social skills. Men compared more than women to celebrities when appraising their social skills. When evaluating their appearance, women compared more than men to models and strangers, whereas men compared more than women to professional athletes. It was also notable that although women and men compared to celebrities’ appearance about equally, when women named specific celebrities to whom they compared, they were exclusively thin and attractive. Britney Spears (pre-pregnancy) was by far the most-nominated comparison target, along with others such as Christina Aguilera and Angelina Jolie. In contrast, men nominated a more heterogeneous group of comparison targets. Although they compared to some relatively attractive celebrities (e.g., Leonardo DiCaprio), they also nominated relatively less threatening targets such as James Belushi. Overall, it appears that women show a greater tendency than men to compare their appearance to threatening irrelevant targets, but did not do so when appraising their social skills. Note that professional athletes, more often nominated by men, could be considered an exception to this pattern. Although it is true that professional athletes might represent a level of athletic success unattainable to many men, we suggest that athletes might represent more positive role models than do models and celebrities, as they could inspire greater health and fitness and athletic motivation. In contrast, striving to be as thin as a supermodel may be more likely to inspire unhealthy patterns of eating and a focus on how the body appears rather than on what the body can accomplish.

Conclusions

In sum, we showed the typical pattern of self-enhancement when people of both sexes described their social skills: People were overwhelmingly more positive than negative. When it comes to appearance, men continued to be much more flattering than critical of themselves. However, this pervasive tendency for self-enhancement disappeared entirely for women. They described themselves in equally positive and negative terms. Notably, it does not appear that women cannot find strengths in their appearance, but rather that they are also considerably more vigilant to weaknesses. Similarly, large gender differences emerged in the pattern of social comparisons made about appearance. Although number of spontaneous comparisons made was relatively low, males clearly selected downward targets, whereas females focused solely on upward targets. These comparisons were associated with self-appraisals: Men who made more downward comparisons were more positive about their appearance and women who made more upward comparisons were more negative about their appearance. Finally, our contention that women would compare their appearance to less relevant targets was supported. Women showed this tendency more than men with all irrelevant targets except professional athletes. It is not the case that women simply attend more to irrelevant comparison targets in any domain of evaluation. Indeed, they were less likely than men to compare to irrelevant others when the domain of comparison was their social skills.

Study 2

In Study 1, we found that three typical findings in the literature are disrupted for women, but only when evaluating their appearance. First, they do not demonstrate positive illusions in this domain. Second, they do not select downward comparison targets despite evidence that their self-views are threatened. Third, they do not avoid comparisons with irrelevant targets (e.g., models and celebrities). These atypical patterns are restricted to women (compared to men) and to the domain of appearance (compared to social skills). We suggest that robust self-enhancement tendencies were disrupted by equally pervasive cultural norms for appearance which apply predominantly to women in our society. This assertion is not new, however little research has systematically examined the precise causal role of cultural norms on individuals’ social comparisons and self-appraisals. This is the purpose of Study 2.

In Study 2, we sought to manipulate two factors. First, we manipulated the relevance of a comparison target. Men and women were all exposed to the same highly attractive same-sex comparison target, but they
were led to believe that this person was either a peer or a professional model. Second, we manipulated the salience of cultural norms for appearance by presenting people either with neutral messages or messages that reflected these norms, but that did not include additional social comparison targets. We drew our messages from magazine advertisements (e.g., cosmetics, diet aids). Fashion magazines are arguably one of the strongest communicators of cultural norms of attractiveness (Fallon, 1990; Kilbourne, 1994; Wolf, 1991).

Social comparison theory and past research has found that people typically prefer to compare themselves with similar or relevant others and avoid comparing themselves with dissimilar or irrelevant others (Wood, 1989). However, in Study 2 we predicted that women would compare their appearance with a logically irrelevant comparison target particularly under certain circumstances. We operationally define comparison relevance in this context as involving the factors that distinguish a professional model from a peer (e.g., amount of effort and assistance that go into achieving the target appearance). These factors should make a model less logically relevant for comparison purposes than a peer would be. When norms for ideal appearance were made salient, we expected women would be likely to evaluate their appearance by comparing even to a logically irrelevant comparison target such as a professional model. Women would compare with an irrelevant, superior comparison target under these circumstances because the cultural norms for appearance imply that these standards are attainable, relevant, and appropriate for average women to strive for. We also anticipated that these unrealistic comparisons would lead women to feel less satisfied with their own appearance and to feel less accepted by others. Conversely, we expect that women for whom the cultural norms are not particularly salient will compare themselves primarily with relevant others.

Our expectations for males are a bit less straightforward. Men are generally more satisfied with their bodies than females (Spitzer et al., 1999), and there is less pressure on men to attain certain ideals of physical attractiveness (Malkin et al., 1999). However, certain groups of men have high body image concerns (e.g., gay men, more feminine men; Lakiss, Ricciardelli, & Williams, 1999; Pliner et al., 1990). More importantly, there is some evidence that men, in general, do not always feel satisfied with their bodies. For example, Hatoum and Belle (2004) found that 30% of men in their study wanted to lose weight, whereas 50% of men wanted to gain weight, therefore 80% of the men showed a desire to change their body, presumably reflecting some dissatisfaction. The weight loss/weight gain distinction is an important one because although very few women want to gain weight, this goal is more common among men (e.g., associated with muscularity). In some surveys, the goal of gaining weight may not be treated as an indication of body dissatisfaction, potentially obscuring an effect.

In sum, although men may not experience as much dissatisfaction as women, some methods do demonstrate considerable body dissatisfaction among men. In addition, the media (and associated cultural norms) may be relevant to men’s self-appraisals too. The number of magazines that men read was positively correlated with measures of masculinity concerns and measures of general fitness concerns (Hatoum & Belle, 2004). In addition, men exposed to ideal images in television commercials reported more muscle dissatisfaction and feeling more depressed than those exposed to neutral images (Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004).

We think that under “typical” circumstances, men are more satisfied with their bodies than women. Our results from Study 1 support this contention. However, when cultural norms aimed at men are salient and they are confronted with a comparison target who is muscular and fit, we think that men might be likely to compare with this target, even if he is described as irrelevant. Thus, our predictions for men are similar to our predictions for women: When cultural norms for ideal appearance are made salient, men will compare with logically irrelevant professional models and will feel less satisfied with their bodies and less accepted by others.

**Method**

**Design**

The present study was a 2 (gender: male or female) × 2 (cultural norms: salient or not salient) × 3 (comparison target: peer, professional model, or none) factorial design.

**Participants**

One hundred and twenty-four (51 male, 73 female) undergraduate students enrolled in an Introductory Psychology course participated in this study. Participants were recruited through the psychology participant pool. All students who participated in this study received a 1% credit towards their final grade in their Introductory Psychology course. Mean age of participants was 18.74 (SD = 1.08).
Procedure

Participants were recruited for a study on media strategies used in advertising. They were told that we were interested in how people evaluate different types of magazine advertising strategies. Participants were told that they would read and examine a series of ads, and would be presented with additional details about the making of some ads. All participants were provided with a booklet of seven different magazine advertisements. To manipulate the salience of cultural norms, half of the participants viewed ads that made the cultural norms for appearance salient and the other half viewed neutral ads. Neutral ads contained no images of people and no information relating to the cultural norm for ideal appearance (e.g., ads for cars, credit cards, garbage bags). Participants in the cultural norms condition viewed three ads that contained information about products related to appearance enhancement, randomly mixed with three neutral ads to make the focus of the ads less obvious. Ads were different for male and female participants to reflect gender-specific norms (i.e., masculinity versus thinness) and appeared in the second, fifth, and sixth positions of the booklet. Men viewed advertisements for Clinique skin products, for a book on building strong abdominal muscles and for a protein bar touted to build muscle. Women viewed advertisements for Clinique makeup, for a weight loss program, and for a low-calorie drink which highlighted the value of staying thin. Although the ads did not contain explicit messages conveying cultural norms, all of them implied that people should strive for a certain cultural ideal of physical appearance. The first six ads that participants viewed contained no images of any people to avoid eliciting social comparisons before the target ad.

Finally, participants were presented with a “target comparison ad”. This ad either contained a highly attractive same-sex individual or, in the control condition, was another neutral ad containing no people or appearance-related information. The target ad always appeared in the seventh position of the booklet. Pilot testing indicated that the images were considered highly attractive and represented superior (upward) comparison targets to the average student.

After viewing the target ad, participants turned to the next page which provided them with purportedly additional information about the making of that ad. Within this description, we manipulated relevance of the target by telling participants that the person in the ad was either a peer or a professional model. In the peer condition, participants were told that the person in the ad was not a professional model, but a university student from a Canadian institution. They were told that this individual entered a contest and was randomly selected to pose in the ad. Participants were also told that the company wanted to portray a “real-life” image so the person in the ad was not specially prepared. In other words, this individual was not given extra assistance with her or his make-up, hair, or general appearance. Participants in the peer condition could logically view the person in the ad as a relevant comparison target because they share some similarities: gender, age, and student status. In the professional model condition, participants were told that the person in the ad was a professional model who was hired by the company to pose in the ad. They learned that the model was specially prepared for the photograph and given considerable extra assistance with his or her make-up, hair, and general appearance. Therefore, despite their similarity in gender and age, participants in this condition could logically view the model as an irrelevant, superior comparison target because of their professional status and because of the additional assistance they received with their appearance.

After viewing and evaluating the booklet of magazine ads, participants were asked to complete a booklet of measures (see below for full description). Following this, participants were fully debriefed, probed for suspicion, and thanked for their participation.

Measures

Relevance of target person

Participants were asked to rate how relevant they thought the target person was for the purposes of comparison. They read the following statement: “When we view photographs of people who are the same sex as us, it is sometimes natural to compare ourselves with these people. Some people can be seen as relevant to make a comparison with, whereas others can be seen as

---

3 Advertisements were selected by first identifying (from a selection of approximately 20 men’s and women’s fashion and lifestyle magazines) all potential ads conveying messages reflecting cultural norms which contained no images of people. Next, the target ads were selected by identifying ads which reflected different aspects of the cultural norms and that were roughly matched for men and women.

4 The suspicion probe indicated that participants believed the cover story—no one indicated suspicion about whether the target image was actually a peer versus professional model.
irrelevant to make a comparison with. We are interested in finding out how relevant you think the person in this advertisement is to you. That is, we would like to know how relevant you think this person is to compare yourself with.” Participants responded on a 1 to 7 scale with 1 as “not relevant at all” and 7 as “extremely relevant.”

Thought-listing task
Participants were asked to indicate what they thought about as they examined the target advertisement (the seventh ad; Dunning & Hayes, 1996). This question was answered in an open-ended format and responses were coded for social comparison statements. The social comparison statements were coded using the same procedure as in Study 1. In this data set we also coded for lateral comparisons (e.g., “She is the same gender and age as I am”) and general comparison statements in which direction was not specified (e.g., “I found myself comparing my appearance to the model”)). Inter-rater agreement ranged from 94% to 100%. This task allowed us to investigate whether people spontaneously compared themselves with the target individual.

Self-esteem
We measured self-esteem (SE) with an adapted (slightly shortened) version of Heatherton and Polivy’s (1991) state self-esteem scale. There were two components of the scale that we thought might be affected by our manipulations: Appearance self-esteem and Social self-esteem. We used four of the six original appearance-related items (e.g., “I feel satisfied with the way my body looks right now”) and six of the seven social self-esteem items (e.g., “I am worried what other people think of me”). Appearance self-esteem reflects people’s assessment of their appearance and body, and social self-esteem refers to the degree to which people feel accepted and well-regarded by others. Participants responded to these items on 5-point scales (1 = not at all to 5 = extremely). Cronbach’s alphas were 0.82 (appearance SE) and 0.77 (social SE).

Results and discussion
Relevance of target person
Conceivably, the relevance measure could simply act as a manipulation check, with the peer rated as more relevant than the professional model. However, we expected the salience of cultural norms to moderate the effect of relevance, such that participants for whom the cultural norms were salient would view the professional model to be as relevant as the peer. A 3-way ANOVA with relevance of target person (peer versus professional model), salience (salient versus not salient) and gender (male versus female) as between-participants factors revealed only a significant relevance by salience interaction, $F(1, 79) = 4.07, p = 0.05$. When cultural norms were not salient, both men and women found the peer ($M = 4.31, SE = 0.38$) to be more relevant than the professional model ($M = 3.21, SE = 0.37$), $F(1, 79) = 4.34, p = 0.04$. However, when cultural norms were made salient, the professional model ($M = 3.61, SE = 0.38$) was judged to be just as relevant for the purposes of comparison as the peer ($M = 4.02, SE = 0.37$), $F(1, 79) = 2.22, p = 0.14$. There were no main effects or interactions with gender ($Fs < 1.26, ps > 0.26$).

Social comparisons
Participants’ descriptions of their thoughts about the target advertisement were coded for spontaneous mentions of social comparisons. We created an aggregate measure of comparison use by summing all comparisons made except for downward comparisons.\footnote{Degrees of freedom differ for the relevance and social comparison analyses because these measures were not collected for the control condition. It was impossible to ask about relevance and comparison processes when the target model was not presented.} We expected that when appearance norms were not salient, participants would compare primarily to the peer, but that when norms were salient they might compare to the professional model just as often as the peer. A Relevance × Salience × Gender ANOVA revealed a significant relevance by salience interaction, $F(1, 80) = 4.96, p = 0.03$ (see Fig. 2). When the cultural norms were not salient, participants made more social comparisons with the peer than the professional model, $F(1, 80) = 12.46, p = 0.001$. However, when cultural norms were salient, participants made more social comparisons with the logically irrelevant model than with the peer, $F(1, 80) = 9.95, p = 0.003$. Hence, we find strong evidence that cultural norms influence comparison choices, in this case leading to a full reversal in preference for comparison with peers versus professional models.

Self-esteem
We examined appearance state self-esteem by conducting a 3-way Relevance × Salience × Gender
ANOV A. Women reported significantly lower appearance state self-esteem ($M = 3.23, SE = 0.09$) than men ($M = 3.82, SE = 0.10$), $F (1, 121) = 19.36, p = 0.001$. All other main effects and interactions did not reach significance ($F_s < 1.32, p > 0.25$).

Because we contend that cultural norms communicate that one will be accepted by others based on appearance, we also expected our manipulations to have a significant effect on social self-esteem. A 3-way Relevance × Salience × Gender ANOVA on social self-esteem revealed a significant interaction between relevance and salience, $F (2, 121) = 3.76, p = 0.03$. As one might expect, under conditions when cultural norms are not salient, peers should have a greater impact on people’s self-esteem than professional models. Consistent with this, after viewing the peer, participants in the norms not salient condition reported lower social self-esteem than participants in the salient condition, $F (2, 121) = 3.54, p = 0.03$ (see Fig. 3). In contrast, when comparing to the professional model, participants reported lower self-esteem when cultural norms were salient than when they were not salient, $F (2, 121) = 3.94, p = 0.02$. Self-esteem did not differ in the no model condition, $F < 1, ns$.

Results generally supported our hypotheses. When cultural norms were not salient, both women and men found the peer to be more relevant than the professional model, compared more with the peer, and felt worse after being exposed to the peer. However, when cultural norms were made salient, the professional model (who should have been dismissed as logically irrelevant) was judged to be just as relevant as the peer, elicited more comparisons than the peer and made participants feel worse.

Cultural norms appear to play an important role in determining people’s reactions to the comparison targets, influencing whether and how they take target relevance into account. The typical pattern found in the social comparison literature (Festinger, 1954; Wood, 1989) reflecting greater interest in relevant comparison targets was displayed when cultural appearance norms were not salient but reversed when norms were salient. Although the professional model should have been logically less relevant than the peer, salience of cultural norms altered this perception.

Notably in this study we found no differences between women’s and men’s reactions to superior comparison targets. We argue that typical gender differences may have disappeared because we experimentally equalized their exposure to cultural norms. In everyday life, women are exposed to a much more consistent and pervasive message about how they need to look to be accepted in society (Fallon, 1990; Kilbourne, 1994; Wolf, 1991). However, in the context of this study, men were exposed to ads which clearly conveyed the message that they too would be held up to extremely high standards of appearance. By equalizing exposure to norms across the two genders, we may have temporarily eliminated typical gender differences.

**General discussion**

If a psychology student were to extrapolate from literatures on positive illusions and social comparisons, they might conclude that people are frequently inclined to process and select self-enhancing information. As a result, people might often flatter themselves about their appearance and gravitate towards comparisons with similar others and those who are flabbier, shorter and less physically appealing than themselves. If this student set out to examine these expectations in women, however, they would find that their predictions were not supported. Although the processes demonstrated in past research on positive illusions and social comparison are
robust and well-documented, an equally widespread exception to the general rule appears for women when the domain of appraisal is their weight and appearance.\(^7\)

In Study 1, we demonstrate that women, but not men, show a pattern of relatively self-deprecating evaluation and comparison when describing their weight and appearance. It was not that women failed to recognize their positive features, but that they also regularly mentioned their weaknesses or areas needing improvement. For example, one woman wrote, “am happy with self, but always want better . . . I have nothing wrong with my weight, but would prefer to be more slim and firm.” Another woman wrote, “I am 5.5 and 118 pounds. For the most part I am content with my body because I am healthy” then continued by saying “If I could lose weight it would give me better peace of mind.” It was quite common to see women acknowledge their positive characteristics, followed shortly thereafter with a list of their flaws.

It is important to note that these differences do not reflect a general tendency for women to be more self-critical or have lower self-esteem than men. Indeed, women reported assessments of their social skills that were as self-enhancing as the self-descriptions that men provided. Although the overall number of social comparisons was low, it was striking that women’s appearance comparisons were exclusively upward, whereas men’s were exclusively downward. These comparisons are associated with the overall positivity of their self-evaluations.

In Study 1, we suggested that this pattern of gender differences may be due to societal differences in the pervasiveness of cultural norms for appearance. Although there are certainly messages directed towards both genders emphasizing expectations for ideal appearance, the norms for women are more homogeneous, more frequent, and more explicit than those for men. Although many researchers have suggested that appearance appraisals are connected to cultural norms, the causal role of these norms has not yet been systematically tested, which was the goal of Study 2.

We found that cultural norms play a central role in the way people interpret comparison information. When norms were not salient, consistent with social comparison theory people deemed peers to be more relevant than professional models, comparing more with peers and altering their self-appraisals to a greater degree after exposure to peers. However, by simply making salient the message that one’s appearance will determine one’s societal worth, women and men both approached comparisons very differently. They judged a logically irrelevant professional model to be just as relevant as a peer, compared even more to the model than they did to the peer and were more affected by the model than the peer. These findings fly in the face of typical social comparison research, but are quite consistent with theorizing about the powerful influence of cultural norms (Thompson et al., 1999). When people know that they will be measured against unattainably high standards, it is not surprising that these standards come to be judged as much more pertinent than they logically should be.

**Appearance versus social self-esteem**

In Study 2, we obtained the predicted interaction between salience of cultural norms for appearance and target relevance on social self-esteem, but not on appearance self-esteem. Although social self-esteem effects have also been demonstrated by other research in the body image literature (Joshi, Herman, & Polivy, 2004), we would have expected the effects on both. It is possible that the appearance items were explicit enough that people demonstrated some resistance to them and that the scale reflected stable, individual differences in appearance self-views (for example, women reported significantly lower appearance self-esteem than men). It may be that social self-esteem was more affected because it was less obviously related to the ads. We suggest that social self-esteem captures an important reaction to the messages conveyed in cultural norms: that one may be judged and valued in society based on one’s appearance. When norms are salient and people are exposed to threatening professional models, their confidence that they will be accepted and valued by others may be most vulnerable.

**Gender differences in salience of cultural norms for appearance**

Results of Study 2 indirectly suggest that typical gender differences in body satisfaction might arise in part because of differences in the salience of cultural norms.

---

\(^7\) The typical “psychology student’s” representation of the literature on social comparison is portrayed in simplified terms to communicate the main findings of interest here: research focusing specifically on what people do in the service of self-enhancement goals. We acknowledge of course that the vast social comparison literature demonstrates many other findings. People seek out other types of comparisons in service of other self-goals, and many factors moderate the process of comparison selection and the consequences of comparisons (Mussweiler, 2003; Taylor et al., 1995).
norms for appearance for men and women. In everyday life women are bombarded with messages about cultural norms for appearance to a greater extent than are men. However, in our study we deliberately exposed men to advertisements that contained the message that they need to be tall, lean and muscular to look good and be accepted in society. When confronted with this message, the “natural” gender difference was eliminated: Men were just as likely to compare with the irrelevant model as women were. Anecdotally, our experiences with finding experimental stimuli in fashion and lifestyle magazines reinforced our contention that messages conveying cultural norms for appearance occur more frequently for women than men. We easily found numerous ads reflecting these norms aimed at women, but had to pore through stacks of men’s magazines to find even a small number of such advertisements aimed at men.

Although it may seem obvious that after bombarding both men and women with cultural norms for appearance that the gender difference would be temporarily eradicated, it may be less obvious why we would not expect to find gender differences in the control condition where cultural norms were not salient. One might argue that because norms are so much more pervasive for women, norms would naturally be more salient to them even in the absence of the experimental stimuli. If norms were already “naturally” very salient to women, one might expect women to compare with the professional model even in the control condition. However, recall that our relevance manipulation was very explicit. In real life, women are not reminded that professional models are irrelevant in so many concrete ways (e.g., the amount of money, effort and assistance with appearance). In this sense, our control condition is not like “real life” for women because the logical irrelevance of the professional model was far less ambiguous than in real life contexts. Essentially, our irrelevant control group can be seen as a mini-intervention in which we effectively convinced people that professional models should indeed be dismissed as irrelevant (but which was only effective in the absence of salient cultural norms).

Inspirational effects of social comparison targets?

It should be noted that the social comparison literature certainly does not suggest that people will never make upward comparisons. Festinger (1954) suggested that people may demonstrate a uni-directional drive upwards; in other words, they will compare with relevant superior others because these individuals offer the most information for self-improvement. Lockwood and Kunda (1997) suggest that people will feel inspired after comparing with relevant others whose achievements are seen as attainable, but will feel demoralized when these achievements seem unattainable. Some researchers have even suggested that a subset of women might feel inspired after exposure to professional models (Mills, Polivy, Herman, & Tiggemann, 2002). Indeed, it is possible that cultural norms make self-improvement goals particularly salient for women. Logically, though, the physical appearance of professional models should be viewed as unattainable. Models are selected from the thinnest 2% of the population and it is their full-time career to maintain and present an ideal appearance. Furthermore, they have a team of professionals who help them to achieve this goal at every stage of the process (Smolak, 1996; Wolf, 1991). Hence, striving for self-improvement by attempting to meet these standards is likely to cause women to pour their resources into a futile task, and to experience a spiral of disappointment and self-blame. In Study 2, we demonstrate that people misjudge the relevance of the professional models when cultural norms are salient. It is not clear whether people are miscalibrating the actual attainability of models’ appearance in these conditions or if they are correctly viewing models’ appearance as unattainable, but still deem them to be pertinent because they know that they will be measured against these standards.

Cultural norms for appearance

This research extends a large body of work that has revealed striking and powerful relations between sociocultural norms and body image disturbance (Heinberg & Thompson, 1995; Thompson & Stice, 2001). Several approaches have characterized this work. First, correlational research demonstrates that exposure to media and internalizing an ideal body type are strongly related to body image and eating disturbances (Cusumano & Thompson, 1997; Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw, & Stein, 1994; Stormer & Thompson, 1998; Thompson & Stice, 2001). Second, experimental evidence shows that exposure to thin media images leads women to feel more dissatisfied with their bodies, feel more depressed and anxious and have increased eating disorder symptomatology (Stice & Agras, 1998; Tiggemann & McGill, 2004; Tiggemann & Slater, 2003). Finally, experimental interventions have demonstrated that when people are encouraged to challenge the sociocultural norms, negative effects are diminished (Stice et al., 2000;
Stormer & Thompson, 1998; Strahan et al., submitted for publication). Although all of this evidence converges on the notion that sociocultural norms play an important role in people’s dissatisfaction with their bodies, none of it directly manipulates the degree to which people are focused on cultural norms for appearance. The studies that manipulate exposure to thin images may well be making norms salient, but effects of the norms are confounded with effects of social comparisons making it impossible to disentangle the two. The intervention research more directly captures the causal role of norms by demonstrating that challenging cultural norms can reduce their effect. Our second study extends this work by demonstrating effects based simply on the salience of the cultural norms, unconfounded with social comparisons. It is also notable that our research demonstrates such findings using a much more subtle manipulation than is typically used in intervention research. Intervention studies typically involve extensive information about norms or activities encouraging people to challenge norms leading to an explicit focus on these issues and potentially increasing the chance of demand characteristics. In contrast, our second study simply presented people with a few ads for appearance-related products (or not) interspersed with neutral ads in the context of a study on media strategies. It is unlikely that demand characteristics could account for our finding of an interaction between salience of cultural norms and relevance of comparison target.

At first blush, our results might appear to be discrepant with the work of Cash et al. (1983) who found that women dismissed comparisons with professional models. However, their findings are highly consistent with the results in our control condition in which cultural norms were not made salient: People compared more to the peer than the professional model. This effect was reversed when norms were highly salient. Our results call into question Cash et al.’s (1983) conclusion that “viewed in a practical sense . . . thumbing through popular magazines filled with beautiful models may have little immediate effect on the self-images of most women” (p. 355). It may be that thumbing through a magazine creates a situation in which cultural norms for appearance become salient, and as a result, increase the potential impact of exposure to professional models.

Limitations

The current studies are a preliminary investigation of how cultural norms affect the way women and men evaluate themselves and the standards against which they compare. Although the studies support our contentions, further work must be done to fully understand the role of cultural norms. In the first study, cultural norms are not directly measured or manipulated, hence we can only speculate about the causal role of cultural norms in producing the pattern of gender differences found. In addition, the sample size, particularly for men, is somewhat low in Study 1 underscoring the need for future replication. Our findings for social comparison processes were supportive of our predictions as well, but future research might examine comparison process using different methodologies to determine whether results converge. Across both of our studies we examined people’s spontaneous generation of social comparison statements within open-ended narratives. Although we argue that this method has advantages over direct closed-ended questions (e.g. “Did you compare to this person?”) because people are more able to express their unique representation of their experience, we cannot account for comparisons that could be occurring outside of conscious awareness or comparisons that people are unwilling to acknowledge (Wood & Wilson, 2003). However, our method does appear to be capturing a valid aspect of participants’ experience which varies in systematic ways across conditions.

Finally, the Study 2 manipulation of norm salience is our first test of the causal role of cultural norms. We used images that reflect these norms and therefore should make them salient. However, further work must be done to uncover what messages and stimuli most regularly prime awareness of these norms for women and men in real-life contexts. The more we understand about the real-world transmission of cultural norms, the better equipped we will be to target these messages directly or to give people the tools they need to challenge them (Stice et al., 2000).

Implications and future directions

We suggest that cultural norms play a powerful role in people’s - especially women’s - self-views. It is quite likely that repeated exposure to norms which produce these effects would have implications for depression and eating disorder symptomatology (Stice et al., 1994). Of course, there are likely to be individual differences in the degree to which people accept or internalize cultural norms for appearance (e.g., Heinberg, Thompson, & Stormer, 1995); however, there is evidence that a majority of women at least implicitly take these norms to be legitimate. For example, women generally view weight as
controllable, therefore they believe that they should be able to achieve their ideal body with effort and discipline (Major & Crocker, 1993). Additionally, women expect others to judge them on their weight and appearance and they appear to think a negative evaluation is warranted if they do not meet society’s standards (Crocker, Cornwell, & Major, 1993). Even if women personally question the messages conveyed by cultural norms, they often believe that others accept the norms to an even greater extent than themselves. Hence, regardless of their own evaluation of the legitimacy of the norms they believe that society will judge them by these standards (Milkie, 1999; Park, 2005). Ideally, the negative impact of these cultural norms would be addressed by changing society: That is, by altering the unrealistic standards and unattainable expectations presented to women as reasonable goals. However, such a broad change is not likely to occur quickly (if at all), hence interventions which give people the tools to recognize and challenge these harmful and unrealistic messages are particularly important.

Conclusions

In sum, our research demonstrates the ways in which women’s self-appraisals are atypical when it comes to weight and appearance (Study 1): They describe themselves more negatively than men and compare with upward, even irrelevant, targets. One reason for this gender difference may be the pervasiveness of cultural norms directed at women. When norms were made equally salient for men and women, both genders were influenced by irrelevant comparison targets, reversing the effect when norms were not salient. Taken together, these studies represent a snapshot of real life differences in men and women’s body appraisals as well as a systematic experimental investigation of the role of cultural norms in these appraisals. It is important to note that our manipulation of cultural norms did not communicate the legitimacy of these norms. In other words, participants were not told that they should believe in these standards for beauty. They were simply made very aware of what norms existed in society. Hence, norm salience alone is enough to influence people’s appraisal processes. This may have important implications for those who explicitly judge the norms to be illegitimate. It may be that disagreeing with the norms will not always be enough to make one immune to their effects. There may be social contexts that communicate the cultural norms powerfully enough to influence even those who do not endorse them. Regardless of their own personal opinion, many people are painfully aware of the standards held by society against which they could be measured. This awareness alone may be enough to make people vulnerable to the norms’ harmful effects.

Acknowledgements

The research in this paper was supported by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) to the second author. The authors gratefully acknowledge the contributions of research assistants, Eileen Berwick, Meghan Kennedy, Travis McTeer, Hui Pan and Stephanie Spielmann.

Research was conducted in the Psychology Department, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo Campus, 75 University Avenue East, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L 3C5.

References


