

Do Women With Low Self-Esteem Use Appearance to Feel Better?

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Body-image refers to one's feelings, attitudes, and perceptions towards one's body and physical appearance. It is an important consideration in the development of eating disorders because it has been shown that disturbances in body-image increase the risk of dieting and bulimia.

This article will explore how body-image and self-esteem may intersect for women.

What is body-image?

Body-image is thought to be composed of four different attitudes and behaviours.

- Body-image **satisfaction** refers to how satisfied one is with one's body-image appearance.
- Body-image **investment** refers to the importance one places on body-image physical appearance in defining one's self and determining self-worth.
- Body-image **behaviour** refers to appearance related behaviours such as grooming, concealing, and avoiding the sight of one's body.
- Body-image **perception** relates to how accurately one estimates one's own body size.

Difficulties in some or all of these areas are regarded as disturbances in body-image. Such disturbances can include dissatisfaction with appearance, over-reliance on appearance to define the self, excessive appearance management behaviour such as overgrooming and frequent mirror checking, or the over-estimation or under-estimation of body size.

The importance of body-image investment

Body-image dissatisfaction and over-reliance on appearance as a source of self-esteem, impair the quality of life of most women, and are key diagnostic criteria for eating disorders.

Although factors causing body-image dissatisfaction are relatively well understood, little is known about why a woman would choose to invest in her appearance to improve her self-worth. This question is important because body-image investment may be a critical factor in determining whether dissatisfaction with one's body will lead to dieting and eating disorders.

Here's an example: A particular individual may be unhappy with her weight and think that she could benefit from losing a few pounds. However, if she places more emphasis on her academic accomplishments rather than on her physical appearance as a source of self-esteem, it is unlikely that she would ever be motivated enough to engage in disordered eating behaviours.

Another individual with exactly the same degree of dissatisfaction with her weight who considers her weight and physical appearance to be instrumentally important in defining her self-concept, may be more likely to engage in dieting or other eating disordered behaviours.

As can be seen from this example, body dissatisfaction *alone* may not lead to the development of eating disordered behaviours. Instead, it is the degree of investment that an individual has in her appearance that may be the critical determining factor.

Testing the link between body-image investment and disordered eating

Clinicians and theorists have suggested that women with low self-esteem invest great importance on their body-image as a source of self-worth. However, a causal link between low self-esteem and high body-image investment has never been demonstrated in the laboratory. Therefore, in our laboratory, we are currently embarking on a series of studies to demonstrate the existence of this causal link. Past studies have shown that when people experience an attack on a specific area of their self-esteem, they compensate by emphasizing an unrelated and positive aspect of the self. This allows them to maintain a global sense of self-worth. For example, being told that one is untalented may result in emphasizing one's kindness. This is how threats to one's self-esteem lead to an investment in one's body-image. Women who have had their self-esteem extensively threatened by negative feedback about their abilities in a variety of domains will attempt to maintain their sense of self-worth by, for instance, focussing on *appearance* as a source of mastery and competence.

Why do women turn to their appearance to restore their feelings of self-worth when their self-esteem is threatened? A number of personal qualities could be used as sources of self-esteem. However, the pervasiveness of thin models in the media, linking thinness to beauty and a desirable lifestyle, offers thinness and beauty as a desirable and seemingly easier-to-achieve route to self-esteem than mastery in other self-esteem domains, such as professional or interpersonal competence.

In our studies we will test the prediction that women experiencing a self-esteem threat unrelated to appearance (in particular, a threat to their intellectual abilities) will emphasize body-image as a source of self-worth if they subsequently view images of thin models. In the real world, this situation may be evident when an individual performs poorly in school and chooses to derive her sense of self-worth from physical appearance.

This choice may be partially influenced by her constant exposure to thin models in the media because these images are portrayed in a way that makes it seem that beauty and thinness are not only easily obtainable, but will also lead to many positive rewards, such as romantic success and popularity.

A preliminary study of the influence of self-esteem on body-image

A preliminary, ethics-committee endorsed, study was conducted in July and August 2005 on a sample of female university students to test these predictions. Students were invited to participate in a research study ostensibly investigating cognitive styles and media effectiveness. Students were told that they would be participating in two separate studies investigating these two distinct constructs. This cover story ensured that participants de-emphasised any connection between the cognitive abilities test and the subsequent viewing of the media images.

In the first part of the study, participants completed a test of cognitive ability that was supposedly a well-established predictor of success, both of academic and career endeavours. Participants were randomly assigned to a self-esteem threat condition, or a condition in which their self-esteem was enhanced. Participants under the self-esteem threat were given more difficult problems to solve, and were also given failure feedback after they had completed the test. Participants in the enhanced self-esteem condition were given easy problems to solve, and were also given success feedback when they completed the test. Following feedback, participants completed questionnaires that tapped into their self-esteem in several domains, their mood, and their own judgment of their performance.

For the second stage of the study, participants from the self-esteem groups moved into another room in which they were told they would be rating media images for effectiveness on various aesthetic dimensions. Some participants from each self-esteem condition viewed images of thin models, while others viewed images of products only advertisements, without accompanying models. After rating the images, the participants were given a series of questionnaires exploring their body-image satisfaction and investment, eating behaviour and attitudes, and depression. Once participants had completed the questionnaires, they were told of the true nature of the study and were invited to discuss the study with the experimenter.

What did we learn?

Results indicated that women whose self-esteem was enhanced, and then watched thin models, reported being much more dissatisfied and preoccupied with their appearance, compared to those who had viewed products only. However, the reverse was true of women who received a threat to their self-esteem. Women whose self-esteem had been

threatened not only declared themselves much more satisfied with their appearance, but also considered their appearance less important after viewing thin models than after viewing product advertisements. Women in the self-esteem threat group also reported being more satisfied and less preoccupied with their appearance than did non-threatened women after viewing thin models. These results lend preliminary support to the hypothesis that under a self-esteem threat in a context where thinness is visible and perceived as desirable, women tend to compensate by defensively enhancing their appearance.

The results of this preliminary study indicate that the combination of self-esteem threats and thin ideal media images results in the use of appearance to restore self-esteem. Using appearance as a source of self-worth, by definition, is likely to lend extreme importance to appearance over time. If one uses appearance as a source of self-worth, high standards of beauty become overly emphasized. Similar processes exist outside of the laboratory. It is thus likely that the current media emphasis on thinness as desirable offers a compelling, but potentially harmful, alternative source of self-esteem to women who feel uncertain of their worth in other areas.

Next steps in exploring self-esteem and body-image

Further research into this area is important. First, it will increase our understanding of what leads some women to focus on appearance to the point of harming their health. Second, it will open new avenues of treatment for body-image disturbance and for eating disorders, which are rooted in body-image disturbance. Finally, it will open new areas of prevention efforts.

Indeed, the best way of preventing eating disorders may not be to warn young women of the dangers of extreme weight loss behaviours, a strategy that has proven unsuccessful. Rather, emphasizing self-esteem building may prove a more fruitful avenue with greater generalizability.

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