The Role of Friends in Adolescent Appearance-Based Rejection Sensitivity: An Exploration of Individual Perceptions of the Friendship Context, and Interactions Within Best Friend Dyads and Friendship Groups

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ABSTRACT

When we consider society’s fixation with physical attractiveness coupled with adolescent concerns about social acceptance, it seems inevitable that some young people develop a tendency to expect social rejection based on the way they look. This tendency has recently been referred to as appearance-based rejection sensitivity (appearance-RS; Park, 2007). Building upon the existing theory and research on rejection sensitivity and body dissatisfaction, and on two recent studies that examined the role of social relationships on appearance-RS (Bowker et al., 2012; Park, DiRaddo, & Calogero, 2009), the primary purpose of the studies reported here were to examine the specific and multiple roles of friends in appearance-RS. Following a review of the literature and the development of a modified version of the Appearance-RS Scale (Park, 2007) suitable for adolescents, the Adolescent Appearance-RS Scale (AA-RSS), two studies were conducted.

Study 1 examined associations between characteristics of the friendship context and appearance-RS in adolescents. The 380 participants were recruited from three schools and were aged 12 to 15.5 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 13.84$). Mediators of these associations were tested, important covariates were considered, and gender differences were examined. Consistent with expectations, findings suggested that when adolescent boys and girls report more experiences of a peer appearance culture, through friends’ and peers’ appearance conversations and teasing, and pressure to be attractive, they more anxiously expect and readily perceive cues of interpersonal rejection based on the way they look. Results also supported the hypothesis that an appearance-focused friendship context would be associated with heightened appearance-RS to the extent that the adolescents personally endorse society’s appearance ideals, compare their appearance to others’ appearance, and feel more dissatisfaction with their appearance. Finally,
associations rarely differed for boys and girls, with one exception: appearance-RS was higher in girls, but not boys, who rated their friends higher on attractiveness.

In Study 2, appearance-RS was examined within the intimate context of best friend relationships \( N = 132, M_{age} = 13.84 \), and friendship groups \( N = 186, M_{age} = 13.83 \) using subgroups of the original 380 participants in Study 1. The Actor-Partner Interdependence Model and social-cognitive mapping were used to examine associations between adolescents’ reports and the reports of their best friends and friendship groups, respectively. Overall, best friends were found to be similar in terms of their appearance-RS and body dissatisfaction, as well as their restrictive dieting, appearance-conditional self worth, valuing of appearance, and self-rated attractiveness. Similarities between the individual and their friendship group were consistent with the findings for friendship dyads, except for self-rated attractiveness and (unexpectedly) restrictive dieting. It was also found that sensitivity to appearance-based rejection was higher in adolescents whose best friends and friendship groups reported higher levels of restrictive dieting, and a sense of self worth that is dependent on feeling attractive. In general, associations did not differ for boys and girls, but having a higher proportion of male friends in the friendship group was associated with lowered appearance concerns, perhaps because boys tend to have more positive attitudes toward their appearance.

In summary, the findings highlight how adolescents’ appearance-focused interactions within their friendships show important links with their concerns about appearance-based rejection, and these associations generally do not differ between boys and girls. Despite the cross-sectional design of these studies precluding conclusions about the direction of effects, these findings make valuable contributions to newly emerging literature concerned with understanding the social correlates of appearance-RS, and highlight the importance of further research into the ways in which diverse
social relationships may be disruptive, but also protective, in relation to adolescent appearance-RS and associated attitudes and behaviours.
STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Haley Jean Webb

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Included in this thesis are papers in Chapters 2, 5, and 6, which are co-authored with other researchers. My contribution to each co-authored paper is outlined at the front of the relevant chapter. The publication reference or status for these papers including all authors, are:


Appropriate acknowledgements of those who contributed to the research but did not qualify as authors are included in each paper.

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