

Coping Mechanisms and Body Modification: An Explanation of the Race for Diets and Cosmetic Surgeries

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Dans notre société où l'image est grandement glorifiée, les femmes se trouvent confrontées à un idéal pratiquement inatteignable. Parallèlement, des techniques de modifications corporelles telles que la chirurgie plastique ou bien des habitudes de vie comme la diète chronique sont devenues des comportements de plus en plus communs. Bien que grandissantes, ces pratiques ne sont toutefois adoptées que par une partie de la population féminine. Nous proposons l'hypothèse que les femmes déficientes de certains mécanismes d'adaptation assimilent au lieu de contraster les images féminines stéréotypées véhiculées par les médias, un mécanisme que nous nommons *fragilisation*. Face à de pareilles images, le processus de *fragilisation* mène à un changement de l'image de soi ainsi que du soi-idéal et prédit une baisse de la satisfaction corporelle des femmes. Nous proposons un modèle intégrant les aspects psychologiques et sociaux prédisant la réaction des femmes face aux images féminines idéalisées et plus particulièrement, nous proposons que le processus de *fragilisation* pourrait prédire l'incidence des comportements de modifications corporelles telles que la diète chronique ou la chirurgie plastique.

Mots-clés: Modification corporelle, mécanisme d'adaptation, satisfaction corporelle, fragilisation.

With the emphasis on image that our current society is projecting, women have found themselves confronted with almost unreachable ideals. Concomitantly, the availability of body-modifying practices, such as cosmetic surgery, and restrained eating habits, such as chronic dieting, are becoming progressively more common. Although body modification is increasingly available and popular, not all women are inclined to try to match female stereotypes. We propose that women, when lacking certain coping mechanisms, assimilate, rather than contrast idealized female images, a process that we termed *fragilization*. In facing the common female stereotypes, we argue that the *fragilization* process leads to a change in perceived and ideal self and predicts higher body dissatisfaction. We propose an integrative model in which the relationship between societal cues and personal characteristics is predicted. Importantly, we suggest a novel mechanism, the *fragilization* process that could directly predict radical actions taken towards modifying one's image such as chronic dieting and cosmetic surgery.

Keywords: body modification, coping mechanisms, body dissatisfaction, fragilization.

Lately, it seems that looking good has become a difficult task to accomplish. Not only is our society raising the criteria for beauty, it is normalizing them. Beauty is now ordinary, while ordinary has become ugly (Braun, 2005). Social pressure surely has had a major impact on how people, especially females, view their own bodies. Socializing processes have led women to objectify and sexualize their bodies, and to monitor closely their appearance (Strahan et al., 2008). Indeed, the importance of women's image goes beyond the simple myth; large women are

stereotyped as more lazy and self-indulgent than thin women, or even large men (Tiggemann & Rothblum, 1988). In fact, even average-weight women are at least as concerned about their weight as overweight men (Stake & Lauer, 1987). There are, therefore, numerous studies and theories which try to explain certain behaviors aimed at body image modification. Diet is now an industry in itself, and restrained eating has become the norm rather than the exception. At its extreme, dieting becomes a chronic habit where results are always deemed insufficient and where the individual engages in successive episodes of restrained eating, which is detrimental for the individual's health. Meanwhile, incidences of cosmetic treatments and surgery have exploded with a 1600% increase in cosmetic procedures between 1992 and 2002. Breast augmentation and rhinoplasty alone have increased by 700% in the last decade. An estimated 6.6 million Americans undergo cosmetic

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surgery each year (American Society of Plastic Surgeons, 2008).

Although body modification is increasingly available and popular, not all women are inclined to pursue the attainment of female stereotypes. Certainly, contextual factors affect the need to conform to such images, but one can wonder what the psychological factors are that lead to body-modifying behaviors, such as chronic dieting and cosmetic surgery. We propose that women, when lacking certain coping mechanisms, assimilate, rather than contrast idealized female images, a process we termed *fragilization*. When facing common female stereotypes, we argue that the fragilization process leads to a change in perceived and ideal self and predicts higher body dissatisfaction. This model is based on many studies which aim to pinpoint the factors, whether individual or environmental, that induced change in the self-perception of women's physical attributes. We suggest an integrative model in which the relationship between societal cues and personal characteristics is qualified by a novel mechanism, the fragilization process, that could directly predict the radical actions of chronic dieting and cosmetic surgery to modify one's image .

Numerous studies have sought to establish the contextual or individual factors that are important to explain the relationship between mass-media conveyed images of women and women's perceptions of themselves. In a study underlining the importance of individual factors in predicting women's reactions to media-conveyed images, Jung and Lennon (2003) highlighted the relative importance of appearance in defining the self, or appearance self-schema. Self-schema can be defined as chronically accessible constructs about the self that biases one's attention towards certain information in the environment. Individuals that are highly appearance schematic are therefore more attuned to appearance-related information, as it is seen as more relevant to define themselves. As a result, individuals that score high on the Appearance Schemas Inventory tend to be more self-conscious in public, more socially anxious, express more symptoms of depression and greater incidence of eating disorders, and have poorer social self-esteem. In this study, self-schema appears to be an important characteristic of the individual in dealing with the idealized representations of women in mass-media, and can predict an increased anxiety in facing the latter.

Other groups have emphasized the importance of environmental factors in determining women's reactions to media-conveyed images. Strahan et al. (2008) found that any woman can base her self-worth on appearance or image if the message conveyed by sociocultural norms is very salient. The important factor to predict domain-specific outcomes is the contingency of self-worth, or people's tendency to base their self-worth on particular domains. Appearance-contingent self-worth is a variable that may be affected by situational factors rather than by preexisting individual differences. By asking the participants to memorize as many details as possible from pictures of thin models, the authors were able to create a context in which social norms were very salient, thereby increasing the appearance-contingent self-worth of the participants. As a result, women reported reduced body satisfaction and increased concern with others' opinions. This study therefore emphasizes the link between environmental pressures and increased body dissatisfaction.

While the study by Strahan et al. (2008) predicts that exposure to stereotyped images increases body dissatisfaction, Mills, Polivy, Herman and Tiggemann's (2002) study proposes that exposure to thin media images can have self-enhancing effects among dieting women. The authors suggested that the effects of exposure to thin media images on non-dieters can be explained by the social comparison theory and would result in women evaluating themselves more negatively after exposure to idealized body images. Non-dieting women rated themselves as larger after exposure to idealized images, though the images did not affect the ideal self. Conversely, dieters exposed to thin media images underwent an assimilation effect immediately after viewing the pictures: dieting women saw themselves as thinner. The images affected the perception of the actual self and the ideal self in individuals of this group, and led to a disinhibition in eating behavior. In the end, dieting women viewed themselves as thinner, and also imagined their ought-to-be selves as thinner. This group of women also showed an increase in eating behavior following exposure to the images. The results of this study vividly contrast the common belief that exposure to media is detrimental to women's self-image, and force us to question why dieting women "benefit" from watching stereotyped images and how this affects their future behavior.

Finally, in an epidemiological study, Schofield, Hussain, Loxton and Miller (2002) tried to determine which psychosocial and health behavioral covariates could be linked to women that had undergone cosmetic surgery. Their results indicated that cosmetic surgery patients were more likely to be average in terms of weight rather than overweight or obese current or former dieters, and smokers or former smokers. In addition, the patients had greater odds of taking medication for nervousness or sleep. There was also a significantly higher than normal incidence of intimate partner violence (IPV) and of body dysmorphic disorders (BDD) among former cosmetic surgery patients. This group also reported higher mean stress scores, higher mean number of life events with lower life satisfactory scores, and lower mental health scores. Although no causal link can be established between the variables, the study has the advantage of regrouping certain individual characteristics common to cosmetic surgery patients.

Recently, an interesting integrative model was proposed by Trampe, Stapel and Siero (2007). Based on Festinger's social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), the authors highlight the importance of relevant comparison in determining the response of an individual to ideal images. When a category of images is deemed as a relevant point of comparison, the authors suggest that the impact of the social comparison will be enhanced, as compared to an irrelevant group of comparisons. They confirmed their hypothesis through different studies and linked many variables with this theory-based approach. Of main interest to this paper, they linked increased body dissatisfaction with relevant social comparison and found that women who were dissatisfied with their bodies were more prone to negative social comparison after exposure to attractive female targets. They argue that body dissatisfied women, as opposed to body satisfied women, view the attractive targets as relevant points of comparison, and that this comparison triggers a negative effect on how they perceive themselves. With the Trampe et al. study, we can understand the need and the interest in creating an integrative model on how the environmental and individual characteristics interact to produce different reactions towards current conceptions of beauty. First, through an integrative model, the psychological mechanisms involved in distorted body image which underlie radical actions of body modification could be hypothesized. Secondly, such a model could narrow down the type of intervention that would be most

effective in countering chronic destructive behaviors. However, there are further variables to be developed in this model. The proposed model does not consider the salience of the sociocultural norms, an environmental factor that greatly affects the intensity of comparison, as demonstrated by Strahan et al. (2008). We could also hypothesize that the women who use mass-media images as points of comparison do so because they are highly appearance self-schematic, and hence they see as relevant any comparison regarding beauty. And finally, we must consider the finding from Mills et al. (2002), where dieting women, as opposed to non-dieting women, modified their ideal-self when exposed to thin media images. It is our opinion that the social comparison theory alone cannot explain these findings, and therefore, the model proposed by Trampe et al. (2007) provides an insufficient explanation of the relationship between stereotyped images and the psychological impact on females.

Proposed model

The proposed model is based on the principle that viewing idealized female images elicits two types of reactions. As proposed by Trampe et al. (2007), the images can activate a social comparison reaction, and this comparison can be seen as relevant or irrelevant by the subject. Furthermore, I propose a second type of reaction: assimilation of the image. When a person assimilates an image, the properties of the image become associated with the viewer. This reaction may explain why the viewer modifies her personal view of herself and her perception of an ideal self, such as in the Mills et al. (2002) study. This reaction is notably different from relevant social comparisons because of the lack of distinction between the image and the viewer, and the internalization of the image's attributes. We can explain why some women would assimilate, rather than contrast, an idealized image, through the relative activation of coping mechanisms. I propose that the accessibility and activation of coping mechanisms will predict a woman's reaction towards idealized female images.

It is proposed that with an optimal amount of coping mechanisms, as in the case of body satisfied women, the image is contrasted with the viewer, and activates a non-relevant social comparison. The perception of the self and the idealized self remains unchanged. The viewer does not perceive the image

as threatening and places the perceived women in a category that differs from hers. In contrast, in a context of deficient coping mechanisms, the viewer contrasts the image with herself, but sees the latter as a relevant point of comparison. Since the image represents an ideal version of women, the viewer sees herself as less than ideal, which affects the perception of her own image. However, the viewer does not assimilate the image and maintains a barrier between the image and her. In this case, the ideal-self is not altered after exposure to the images. Finally, when there is no barrier between the image and the self, the viewer assimilates the image's attributes, such as the dieting women in Mills et al. (2002) study. This means that the viewer will momentarily see herself as thinner, and will change her ideal-self to one that is thinner, and will change her eating behavior accordingly. What this would predict is a persistent dissatisfaction with one's appearance, unreachable ideals, and repetitive actions taken to conform to the idealized images. What distinguishes a relevant comparison from an assimilation is the action taken, i.e. dieting, towards the modification of the body image.

These reactions seem to imply a change in the psychological state of mind, reflecting a reduced barrier between the image and the self, which we can hypothesize as being due to a diminution of coping mechanisms. This lack of coping mechanisms implies that some women's reactions to the mass media is much more pronounced since the images become a reference point that is more meaningful and integrated in the women's perception of themselves. It also implies that coping mechanisms protect the self by separating the person from the image, allowing for an evaluation of the self that is based on criteria which are not necessarily transmitted through the mass media. We termed this lack of coping mechanisms fragilization as it implies a lower ability to tolerate social frustrations and a higher need for conformity. It coincidentally also explains the results found by Schofield et al. (2002), that cosmetic surgery patients were more stressed and less satisfied with their lives, and were more prone to obsessive-compulsive tendencies and poorer mental health. I propose that through this process, a person is more likely to undertake radical steps to remodel their appearance, such as chronic dieting and cosmetic surgery.

With the hypothesized central importance of coping mechanisms, the examination of their origin

	change in perceived-self	change in ideal-self
non-relevant comparison	-	-
relevant comparison	+	-
assimilation effect	+	+

Table 1. Possible reactions towards viewing idealized female images

and variability among different individuals becomes a daunting task. Though many factors must be implicated in their development and expression, such as childhood experiences, education and culture, we believe that the salience of the norm, an environmental factor, and the appearance self-schema, an individual factor, are key players in determining the presence and activation of coping mechanisms in a given situation. We argue that both these factors reduce the availability of coping mechanisms. First, being appearance self-schematic makes one define the self through one's appearance. Hence, fewer barriers are raised between the image and the self, and an increased association is made with the image. As for the salience of norms, Strahan et al. (2008) demonstrated that anyone can base their self-worth on appearance, given an environment where the norms of beauty are very salient. This environment lessens the barriers by which a woman can separate herself from the image by activating an appearance-based self-contingency which momentarily reduces the coping mechanisms. We can note that for appearance self-schematic women, there is a chronic deprivation of coping mechanisms relative to image analysis, whereas the impact of the salience of the norms is limited in time. However, in a context where the norms are very salient and highly accessible through television, magazines, videos, advertising, etc., the environment exerts a significant pressure in favor of conforming to the image.

As mass media are often pinpointed as an important cause for the increasing number of young women choosing to undergo radical body modification, some efforts have been made by certain companies to adopt a different representation of female figures. The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty uses regular women instead of models in their advertisements, and offers a web site with tips for boosting young girls' self-esteem, mentorship workshops, and debates on common beauty stereotypes. Although the campaign has elicited much enthusiasm, we can question the actual impact

one company can have when all other societal cues point in another direction. Also, though we believe that critical media analysis should be emphasized in social debates, young girls need to develop more tools for managing the increasing pressure to conform to the unreachable ideals. Mostly, we must question the socialization process all females are subjected to in our current society. Do we still favor form over content when it comes to women? Could we link women's pressure to conform with higher appearance self-schema? And what about men? If socialization processes induce different types of self-schema, men should have different coping mechanisms when dealing with idealized images, be less likely to assimilate those images, and less inclined to take radical actions in order to attain those ideals. These are directions that future researchers might pursue to create an increasingly accurate, integrative model on the relationship between individuals and social conformity. Finally, we can certainly appreciate that the consequences of the fragilization process need to be considered since it is highly unlikely that the popularity of chronic dieting and cosmetic surgery will diminish in the near future. Now that these practices are becoming a banality, we should question ourselves on the impact of being socialized in an environment where body parts are becoming changeable commodities.

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