

## SOCIOCULTURAL INFLUENCE AND APPEARANCE-BASED REJECTION SENSITIVITY AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

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The present research examined the influence of parents, peers, and the media in predicting college students' Appearance-based Rejection Sensitivity (Appearance-RS)—the degree to which individuals anxiously expect to be rejected based on their physical appearance. Given that women are socialized to be more appearance-focused than men, women were hypothesized to show greater Appearance-RS in response to sociocultural influences than men. A survey was administered to 220 students at a large public university in the United States. Overall, women showed greater sensitivity to appearance rejection than men. Specifically, perceptions of peer conditional acceptance based on appearance were associated with Appearance-RS among women. In addition, the more women and men internalized media ideals and felt media pressure to look attractive, the more sensitive they were to appearance rejection. No significant effects of parental influence were found. Thus, peer conditional acceptance predicted Appearance-RS among women, and media influence predicted Appearance-RS among women and men.

Physical attractiveness is highly valued in Western cultures and is linked to important life outcomes (Bartky, 2003; Calogero, Boroughs, & Thompson, 2007). Physically attractive people are less stigmatized by others, are perceived to be more likeable and desirable as friends and romantic partners, and have significant advantages in employment and job-related outcomes than those who are regarded as physically unattractive (Berscheid & Walster, 1974; Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991; Hosoda, Stone-Romero, & Coats, 2003). Not surprisingly, people in Western cultures believe that “what is beautiful is good” (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972), and frequent exposure to physical appearance messages and ideals has been shown to reinforce the association between beauty and social rewards (Eagly et al., 1991; Evans, 2003).

The pervasive cultural emphasis on attractiveness and its attendant rewards may lead some individuals to develop heightened sensitivity to rejection based on their appearance, or *Appearance-based Rejection Sensitivity* (Appearance-RS). Appearance-RS is a personality processing system characterized by a dispositional tendency to

anxiously expect, readily perceive, and overreact to signs of rejection based on one's physical appearance (Park, 2007). Importantly, Appearance-RS is the first known empirically validated construct that directly links appearance concerns with interpersonal concerns about rejection among both women and men.

Appearance-RS consists of both an affective and cognitive component. Anxiety about appearance rejection represents the affective component, whereas expectations of rejection represent the cognitive component. These components are theorized to interact with one another in a multiplicative fashion, such that anxiety about appearance rejection amplifies cognitive expectations of such rejection. This conceptualization suggests that an individual's appearance concerns are rooted not just in intrapsychic concerns about how one looks, but in how one appears to others and in concerns of being rejected by others based on one's appearance.

Appearance-RS affects how social information about appearance is perceived, processed, and applied to oneself and to others. Specifically, the more sensitive individuals are to appearance rejection, the more lonely and rejected they feel when asked to list dissatisfying aspects of their appearance and the more negative they feel following an ambiguous experience of appearance rejection (Park, 2007). Following a direct instance of appearance-based rejection, these individuals become socially avoidant and seek to withdraw from close others and from social interactions more generally (Park & Pinkus, 2008). Importantly, this finding emerged even after controlling for Downey and Feldman's

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(1996) general rejection sensitivity measure, providing support for the distinctiveness of Appearance-RS.

Anxious expectations of appearance-based rejection may also heighten vulnerability to mental and physical health risks. For example, higher Appearance-RS scores are related to more appearance-based social comparisons, eating disorder symptoms, and interest in getting cosmetic surgery, especially after recalling a time when one felt teased or rejected based on one's looks (Park, 2007; Park, Calogero, Harwin, & DiRaddo, 2008).

Although evidence is accumulating regarding the negative consequences of Appearance-RS, relatively little is known about the social correlates of this dispositional tendency. Based on previous work that has implicated parents, peers, and the media in the transmission of appearance-based ideals and values (e.g., Keery, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004; Levine, Smolak, & Hayden, 1994; Shroff & Thompson, 2006), a primary aim of the present research was to examine the role of parents, peers, and the media as unique predictors of Appearance-RS.

Another primary aim of our research was to examine potential gender differences in the influence of sociocultural factors on Appearance-RS, as studies examining links between appearance evaluations and self-esteem have often found stronger effects for girls relative to boys (Muth & Cash, 1997; Tiggemann & Rothblum, 1997). According to Objectification Theory, such findings may be explained by the fact that women's bodies are subjected to chronic sexual objectification in Western cultures (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Because women are socialized to focus on their observable, measurable physical attributes (e.g., body shape, weight) relative to their nonobservable attributes (e.g., health, energy level), they may experience greater pressure than men to habitually monitor their appearance from an observer's perspective.

From this standpoint, gender differences in appearance concerns may be due to differences in socialization practices, rather than to innate sex differences. For example, the finding that women expect improvements to their appearance to make them happier, better adjusted, and more successful, whereas men do not, may be attributable to the prevalence of societal messages linking female beauty with social rewards (Engeln-Maddox, 2006). Consistent with Objectification Theory, we predicted that women's sensitivity to appearance rejection would be more strongly associated with sociocultural factors that emphasize women's appearance compared to men's. The next sections elaborate upon our hypotheses and rationales for each sociocultural factor, specifically, the roles of parents, peers, and the media in Appearance-RS.

### *Sociocultural Factors and Appearance-RS*

According to the Tripartite Influence Model, parents, peers, and media represent three formative influences on body image disturbances and eating problems (Keery, van

den Berg, & Thompson, 2004; Shroff & Thompson, 2006). Although our focus was not on body image or eating disorders per se, the emphasis on appearance as a core feature of Appearance-RS suggests that this construct may fit well within this model. Specifically, we theorized that sensitivity to appearance rejection might be associated with the extent to which an individual perceives the source of influence to highly value appearance and to be conditionally accepting based on appearance.

First, parents were hypothesized to influence their child's sensitivity to appearance rejection by transmitting their own values about appearance to their child and by conveying the message that their love and acceptance are conditional on the child's appearance. Indeed, previous research has shown that parents play an important role in influencing their child's appearance and body image concerns via modeling and encouragement (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003; Piquart & Silbereisen, 2004; Wertheim, Mee, & Paxton, 1999). Moreover, if children perceive that their parents' love for them is conditional on how they look, then they may come to associate appearing attractive with acceptance and appearing unattractive with rejection. Along these lines, research by Elliot and Thrash (2004) found that parents who used love withdrawal with their child, by acting coldly, showing avoidance, or physically separating themselves from the child when he or she did not meet their academic expectations, predicted increased fear of failure in the child in college. Applying these ideas to the present study, feeling conditionally accepted by one's parents based on appearance might generalize to anxious expectations of appearance-based rejection from others more broadly.

Although parental influence has been identified as an important source for conveying sociocultural ideals and attitudes about appearance to both girls and boys (Levine & Smolak, 1996; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003), the majority of studies indicate that parents exert a stronger influence on the appearance concerns of girls relative to boys (e.g., Barker & Galambos, 2003; Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). For example, compared to boys, girls tend to receive more information from their parents regarding weight and dieting and, in turn, report greater body image concerns (Phares, Steinberg, & Thompson, 2004). Along these lines, Smolak, Levine, and Schermer (1999) found that the body-esteem scores of elementary school girls were related to maternal dieting and parental complaints about their own weight, and McKinley (1999) found that mothers' body surveillance and body shame negatively influenced daughters' experiences with their own bodies. Based on such findings, we expected to find a stronger relationship between parental influence and Appearance-RS for women compared to men.

Second, peers were expected to play an important role in predicting people's sensitivity to appearance-based rejection. A large body of research has shown that people are likely to adopt the norms, values, and behaviors of their peer group; this may be especially true for appearance ideals

(e.g., Crandall, 1988; Jones, Vigfusdottir, & Lee, 2004). For example, adolescent boys and girls who reported engaging in frequent conversations about appearance with friends endorsed greater internalization of appearance ideals, which in turn predicted greater body dissatisfaction (Jones et al., 2004). Because individuals who perceive their peers to highly value appearance may come to internalize this value as their own, we predicted that perceptions of conditional peer acceptance based on appearance might be an especially strong correlate of Appearance-RS. Given that peer acceptance is one of the central concerns of young adults (Bukowski, Hoza, & Bovin, 1993), we reasoned that college students who perceived their peers to be conditionally accepting of them based on appearance might be more sensitive to the possibility of rejection based on appearance.

Although some studies have identified peer influence as an important source for conveying sociocultural ideals and attitudes about appearance to both girls and boys (e.g., Jones & Crawford, 2006), most studies in this area have found more consistent associations between peer influence and appearance concerns among women (Paxton, Schutz, Wertheim, & Muir, 1999; Thompson et al., 1999). For example, researchers have found significant links between women's experiences of negative appearance commentary from peers and negative body image (Levine et al., 1994; Oliver & Thelen, 1996). Pre-adolescent girls who believed that their friends desired a thin body ideal were likely to adopt a thinner ideal for themselves (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006), and college women who joined sororities tended to adopt bingeing and purging behaviors that were similar to their peers' so as to be liked and accepted (Crandall, 1988). Based on these findings, we expected to find stronger relationships between peer influence and Appearance-RS for women compared to men.

Third, the media plays a powerful role in shaping appearance ideals and affecting the way individuals feel about themselves and their bodies (Levine & Smolak, 1996). Not only do the media provide information regarding the importance and value of appearance ideals, but the media may also lead individuals to internalize appearance ideals and to feel pressure to meet such ideals. Indeed, research has shown that media internalization—the degree to which individuals accept societal standards of attractiveness as their own and engage in behaviors intended to meet those standards—is a key predictor of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (Thompson & Stice, 2001). In addition, feeling pressure from the media to attain unrealistic appearance ideals has been demonstrated to be a predictor of body dissatisfaction (Stice, Spangler, & Agras, 2001). Based on such findings, we hypothesized that internalization of media appearance ideals and feeling pressure to look attractive would be associated with Appearance-RS.

Although the media has been increasingly identified as an important source for conveying sociocultural ideals and attitudes about appearance to both girls and boys (e.g., Thompson & Cafri, 2007), the majority of studies to date

have found more consistent associations between media influence and appearance concerns among women and girls (e.g., Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). Indeed, virtually every form of media exposes people to information about feminine ideals of thinness and beauty (Calogero et al., 2007), including magazines (Englis, Solomon, & Ashmore, 1994), television shows (Harrison & Cantor, 1997), television advertisements (Richins, 1991), music television (Tiggemann & Slater, 2003), and children's fairy tales (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003). Based on such findings, we expected to find a stronger relationship between media influence and Appearance-RS for women compared to men.

### *Study Overview*

Whereas research to date has examined the consequences of Appearance-RS, the present study is the first known to empirically investigate specific sociocultural factors that may be associated with Appearance-RS. Furthermore, we tested whether gender moderated the relationship between each sociocultural factor and Appearance-RS. Building upon the extant literature, we hypothesized that increased emphasis and valuing of appearance, as well as perceived conditional acceptance based on appearance conveyed by parents, peers, and the media, would be related to greater sensitivity to rejection based on appearance. In addition, given that sociocultural pressures to value and strive for physical appearance ideals are stronger for women than for men, we expected that women's sensitivity to appearance-based rejection would be more strongly associated with sociocultural factors than men's.

## METHOD

### *Participants and Procedure*

Two hundred twenty (114 men, 106 women) undergraduates from an introductory psychology course at the University of Buffalo participated for course credit. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 33 years ( $Mdn = 19.00$ ,  $SD = 10.8$ ). Due to computer error, we were able to obtain race information from only a subset of participants ( $n = 167$ ). This subset consisted of 53% Whites, 35% Asian Americans, 5% African Americans, 2% Hispanics, and 5% Other. Participants came to the lab for a study on "Social Development" and were told that researchers were interested in examining aspects of social development via reports of parent, peer, and media influence. Participants were seated at individual cubicles and responded to the following questionnaires and items on a computer, in the following order: appearance-RS, media influence, peer influence, parent influence, trait self-esteem, personal-RS, gender, age, race, and self-perceived attractiveness. At the end of the study, participants were debriefed, given course credit, and dismissed.

### Measures

*Appearance-RS scale.* The Appearance-RS scale assesses anxious concerns and expectations of rejection based on one's physical attractiveness. The original Appearance-RS scale contained 15 scenarios and demonstrated high internal consistency ( $\alpha = .90$ ) and acceptable test-retest reliability ( $r = .69, p < .001$ ) over a 6–8 week period (Park, 2007). Appearance-RS has been shown to be related to expected personality variables, such as low self-esteem, general rejection sensitivity, and neuroticism, thereby supporting the construct validity of this measure (Park, 2007). To reduce the number of items current participants were asked to complete, we administered a shortened version of the Appearance-RS scale, which showed high internal consistency (10 scenarios,  $\alpha = .88$ ).

The scenarios in the Appearance-RS scale were designed to be ambiguous in nature to assess individual variation in how anxious participants feel about being rejected based on their appearance and their expectation of this rejection occurring. An example is "You are leaving your house to go on a first date when you notice a blemish on your face." Participants responded to each question by indicating their anxiety about being rejected based on their appearance. An example is "How concerned or anxious would you be that your date might be less attracted to you because of the way you looked?" using a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*very unconcerned*) to 6 (*very concerned*). Participants then indicated their expectation of rejection based on appearance. An example is "I would expect that my date would find me less attractive" using a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*very unlikely*) to 6 (*very likely*). We use the term rejection broadly, to reflect feeling disapproved of or negatively evaluated by others based on one's appearance.

Appearance-RS is calculated for each situation by multiplying the degree of anxious concern with the degree of rejection expectation and then averaging the total ratings of anxious expectations of rejection across situations for each participant. Ratings are multiplied because we are interested in the interaction between anxious concerns and expectations, in the same way that Downey and Feldman (1996) calculated general rejection sensitivity scores in previous studies. The higher an individual scores on both the anxiety and expectation of rejection dimensions across situations, the higher is their Appearance-RS score.

*Parents' valuing of appearance.* Although scales exist that measure parental influence in relation to appearance, these scales primarily assess influence specific to weight loss, thinness, and muscularity (e.g., Benedikt, Wertheim, & Love, 1998). Because we were interested in perceptions of parents' valuing of appearance more generally, we developed specific items for the purpose of this study. We created five items to assess the degree to which parents emphasized and valued their own physical appearance: (a) "My parents place value on their appearance," (b) "My par-

ents are concerned with their physical attractiveness," (c) "My parents think it is important for them to have fashionable and stylish clothes," (d) "My parents spend a lot of time working out to improve their appearance," and (e) "My parents worry a lot about their physical appearance." Responses were made on a scale from 1 (*disagree*) to 5 (*agree*). High internal consistency was demonstrated for these items ( $\alpha = .80$ ).

*Conditional parental acceptance based on appearance.* We developed five items ( $\alpha = .83$ ) to assess the degree to which participants felt that their parents were conditionally accepting of them based on appearance. The items were: (a) "If I had a better body, I think my parents would be more accepting of me," (b) "My parents criticize me if I don't look my best," (c) "My parents are accepting of my looks just the way that they are" (reversed), (d) "If I was more attractive, my parents would be more accepting of me," and (e) "My parents value me for the person I am, not the way I look" (reversed). Responses were made on a scale from 1 (*disagree*) to 5 (*agree*).

After completing both parent influence scales, participants were asked which parent they felt most influenced by when answering the questions. Among women, 78% reported being influenced by their mothers; among men, 69% reported being influenced by their mothers. We conducted analyses to examine differential effects of parental influence; there were no significant associations found between Appearance-RS and parents' valuing of appearance or parent conditional acceptance based on appearance when examining maternal influence, paternal influence, same-sex parent-child effects, or opposite-sex parent-child effects.

*Peers' valuing of appearance.* Five items were adapted from items developed by Jones and colleagues (2004) in their study of adolescents' peer appearance culture. Whereas Jones et al. (2004) assessed appearance conversations with friends and peer teasing specifically in relation to thinness and muscularity, we developed items to reflect peer valuing of appearance more generally: (a) "My friends place value on being physically attractive," (b) "My friends strive to have bodies similar to models and athletes," (c) "My friends are preoccupied with trying to be attractive to the opposite sex," (d) "My friends think that it is important to be the most stylish and fashionable," and (e) "My friends are not concerned with being physically attractive" (reversed). Responses were on a scale from 1 (*disagree*) to 5 (*agree*). High internal consistency was demonstrated for these items ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

*Peer conditional acceptance based on appearance.* The conditional peer acceptance items were adapted from appearance-dependent acceptance scales originally developed by Oliver and Thelen (1996) for use with children and modified for use with adolescents by Jones and colleagues (2004). The internal reliability and validity of these

items have been documented (Oliver & Thelen, 1996; Jones et al., 2004). Whereas these scales focused on peer acceptance based on thinness and muscularity in particular, we adapted these items to assess more general aspects of appearance. The five items were: (a) "If I had a better body, I think I would be more popular among my friends and peers," (b) "I worry that if I do not have an attractive body, the opposite sex will not pay attention to me," (c) "If I had more stylish clothes, I think I would be more popular among my friends and peers," (d) "I am preoccupied with the parts of my appearance that may not be attractive to the opposite sex," and (e) "If I could change parts of my body, I think I would be more popular among my friends and peers." Responses were made on a scale from 1 (*disagree*) to 5 (*agree*). The scale showed high internal consistency ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

*Media influence.* The Sociocultural Attitudes Toward Appearance Scale-3 (Thompson, van den Berg, Roehrig, Guarda, & Heinberg, 2004) is a 30-item questionnaire that assesses four dimensions of media influence related to body image and appearance: Internalization-General, Internalization-Athletic, Pressures, and Information. The Internalization-General dimension includes nine items that measure the degree to which individuals have bought into the norms for body shape and appearance portrayed in the media and the degree to which they attempt to match these standards (e.g., "I would like my body to look like the people who are on TV"). The Internalization-Athletic dimension includes five items that measure the degree to which individuals desire to achieve the appearance of athletes portrayed in the media (e.g., "I wish I looked as athletic as sports stars"). The Pressures dimension includes seven items that assess the degree to which individuals feel pressured by the media to change their appearance (e.g., "I've felt pressure from TV or magazines to have a perfect body"). Finally, the Information dimension includes nine items that assess the degree to which media are important sources for obtaining information about attractiveness (e.g., "Magazine articles are an important source of information about fashion and being attractive").

All responses were made on a scale from 1 (*definitely disagree*) to 5 (*definitely agree*). High internal consistency and construct validity have been demonstrated for the four dimensions in nonclinical samples (Calogero, Davis, & Thompson, 2004; Thompson et al., 2004). Consistent with prior work, the general and athletic internalization dimensions were combined for use in model testing given that the underlying construct of internalization is the same and to simplify interpretation of the data (Calogero et al., 2004; Markland & Oliver, 2008). Internal consistencies for the media factors in this sample were .89 (Internalization), .92 (Pressures), and .86 (Information).

*Individual difference variables.* Past research has shown that Appearance-RS is related to individual differences

in self-esteem, general rejection sensitivity, and self-perceived attractiveness (Park, 2007). We therefore controlled for these variables in the present study to examine whether sociocultural factors uniquely predicted Appearance-RS, even after accounting for the effects of these variables. In addition, participants reported demographic information (i.e., gender, age, ethnicity).

Trait self-esteem was assessed using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE; Rosenberg, 1965). A sample item was "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself." Responses were made on a 7-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The RSE has sound reliability ( $\alpha = .88$  in our sample) and test-retest reliability, and it has been shown to be a reliable and valid measure of self-esteem (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991).

The 8-item Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (Downey & Feldman, 1996) measures anxious expectation of rejection across situations in which participants imagine themselves making requests of others. For example, "You ask your friend to do a big favor for you." For each situation, participants indicate their anxiety about each outcome (e.g., "How concerned or anxious would you be over whether or not your friend would do this favor?") on a scale from 1 (*very unconcerned*) to 6 (*very concerned*) and their expectation of rejection in the situation, from 1 (*very unlikely*) to 6 (*very likely*). Personal-RS scores are calculated in the same way that Appearance-RS is calculated. The scale has acceptable internal reliability ( $\alpha = .75$  in our sample) and test-retest reliability (see Downey & Feldman, 1996). Finally, participants reported their self-perceived attractiveness (1 = *not at all attractive*; 7 = *very attractive*).

## RESULTS

### *Summary of Analytic Strategy*

We conducted our analyses in three parts. In Part 1, preliminary analyses compared women's and men's Appearance-RS scores and examined correlations between Appearance-RS with the individual differences and sociocultural measures. In Part 2, we tested whether there were ethnic differences in Appearance-RS. In Part 3, we conducted a series of hierarchical regression analyses exploring the influence of parents, peers, and media, respectively, on Appearance-RS. Specifically, Step 1 included the individual difference covariates (trait self-esteem, personal-RS, and self-perceived attractiveness); Step 2 included gender (coded as 1 = female, 0 = male) and the parental, peer, or media influence main effects; Step 3 included the appropriate interactions between gender and the parent, peer, or media variables. Consistent with our proposed model, we tested the moderating effect of gender at one standard deviation above and one standard deviation below the mean of each sociocultural factor and report results as standardized beta coefficients. We conclude with ancillary analyses that examined a full model in which all sociocultural and

individual difference variables were entered simultaneously into a single regression model.

### *Preliminary Analyses*

First, as expected, women in this sample showed significantly greater Appearance-RS than men,  $t(218) = 4.46$ ,  $p < .001$ . Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations among Appearance-RS, the individual difference measures, and the sociocultural factors for men and women separately. Consistent with previous research, both men and women showed significant associations between Appearance-RS and the individual difference variables. Specifically, Appearance-RS scores were associated with low self-esteem, high personal-RS, and low self-perceived attractiveness among both women and men.

### *Ethnic Differences in Appearance-RS*

Next, we tested for potential differences in Appearance-RS as a function of ethnicity. Given our limited sample of African American and Hispanic participants, we collapsed our ethnicity variables into three categories: Asian Americans ( $n = 56$ ), Whites ( $n = 88$ ), and Other ( $n = 23$ ). Results of a one-way analysis of variance revealed no significant effect of ethnicity on Appearance-RS,  $F(3, 164) = 2.03$ ,  $p = .13$ . Given the lack of significant differences, we did not further examine ethnic comparisons in sociocultural influence.

### *Sociocultural Factors and Appearance-RS*

Table 2 summarizes the results. Contrary to predictions, parental influence was not found to be a significant predictor of Appearance-RS. That is, participants' Appearance-RS was not significantly associated with perceptions of parents' valuing appearance or conditional parental acceptance based on appearance.

For the peer influence model, peer conditional acceptance based on appearance, but not peers' valuing of appearance, was significantly associated with Appearance-RS. Moreover, there was a significant gender interaction, such that the more women perceived peers to be conditionally accepting of them based on appearance, the more sensitive they were to appearance rejection,  $\beta = .29$ ,  $p < .01$ . This effect was not significant, however, among participants who perceived low peer influence.

For the media influence model, the final step of the regression model revealed significant main effects of media internalization and media pressures on Appearance-RS, whereas media information about appearance was not significantly associated with Appearance-RS. Contrary to predictions, these main effects were not qualified by significant gender interactions, suggesting that internalization of media ideals and feeling pressure from the media to look attractive are associated with Appearance-RS similarly for women and men.

### *Ancillary Analyses*

To examine the unique effects of each sociocultural factor, controlling for the effects of all other variables, we tested a full regression model that simultaneously included gender, the individual difference variables, sociocultural variables, and interactions between gender and each sociocultural variable. For the sociocultural variables, two significant findings emerged. First, there was a main effect of media pressures, such that the more women and men felt pressured by the media to look attractive, the greater their sensitivity to appearance-based rejection,  $\beta = .31$ ,  $p < .001$ ; specifically, media pressures accounted for 3% unique variance in Appearance-RS. Second, there was an interaction between gender and peers' conditional acceptance,  $\beta = .25$ ,  $p < .05$ , which accounted for 1% unique variance in Appearance-RS. Specifically, compared to men, the more women perceived peer conditional acceptance based on appearance, the more sensitive they were to appearance-based rejection,  $\beta = .19$ ,  $p < .05$ . This was not found among women and men who perceived peers to be low in conditional acceptance.

## DISCUSSION

Appearance-RS is the first known empirically validated construct to directly link intrapersonal appearance concerns with interpersonal concerns of rejection; it represents the joint influence of appearance anxieties with the cognitive expectation of rejection based on appearance. In the present study, we found that women showed greater sensitivity to appearance-based rejection than men. Importantly, this gender difference was moderated by perceptions of peer conditional acceptance: The more women perceived peers to be conditionally accepting of them based on appearance, the more sensitive they were to appearance-based rejection. Indeed, only peer conditional acceptance, and not the mere emphasis or valuing of appearance by peers, was related to Appearance-RS among women.

Contrary to predictions, parental influence was not significantly related to Appearance-RS. However, media influence—specifically, internalization of media appearance ideals and feeling media pressure to attain such ideals—was associated with Appearance-RS for both women and men. In contrast, mere exposure to information from the media emphasizing the importance of appearance ideals was not found to be significantly related to Appearance-RS. Together, these findings suggest that individuals' anxious expectations about appearance rejection are associated specifically with the belief that their appearance will determine whether or not they will be accepted by others, rather than the belief that appearance is important per se. Moreover, peer and media influence remained significant predictors of Appearance-RS even after controlling for individual differences in self-esteem, personal-RS, and self-perceived attractiveness, suggesting

**Table 1**  
Means, Standard Deviations, and Zero-Order Correlations Among Appearance-RS, Individual Difference Variables, and Sociocultural Factors by Gender

|                                    | 1                  | 2                 | 3                 | 4                 | 5                 | 6                 | 7                 | 8                 | 9                 | 10                | 11                |
|------------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| <i>M Men</i>                       | 8.92 <sub>a</sub>  | 5.50 <sub>a</sub> | 8.51 <sub>a</sub> | 5.04 <sub>a</sub> | 2.33 <sub>a</sub> | 1.73 <sub>a</sub> | 2.68 <sub>a</sub> | 2.68 <sub>a</sub> | 2.98 <sub>a</sub> | 2.35 <sub>a</sub> | 2.98 <sub>a</sub> |
| <i>M Women</i>                     | 11.31 <sub>b</sub> | 5.28 <sub>a</sub> | 8.45 <sub>a</sub> | 5.08 <sub>a</sub> | 2.55 <sub>a</sub> | 2.07 <sub>b</sub> | 3.07 <sub>b</sub> | 3.06 <sub>b</sub> | 3.35 <sub>b</sub> | 3.37 <sub>b</sub> | 3.32 <sub>b</sub> |
| <i>SD Men</i>                      | 3.34               | .98               | 2.73              | 1.10              | .85               | .72               | .85               | .95               | .78               | .93               | .88               |
| <i>SD Women</i>                    | 4.56               | 1.10              | 3.68              | 1.06              | .92               | .98               | 1.04              | 1.08              | .82               | .99               | .81               |
| 1. Appearance-RS                   | —                  | -.52***           | .51***            | -.27**            | .13               | .33**             | .44***            | .71***            | .58***            | .59***            | .25*              |
| 2. Self-esteem                     | -.22*              | —                 | -.61***           | .47***            | .05               | -.27**            | -.23*             | -.49***           | -.34***           | -.35**            | -.14              |
| 3. Personal-RS                     | .24*               | -.45***           | —                 | -.28**            | .05               | .39***            | .21*              | .41***            | .22*              | .20*              | .16               |
| 4. Self-perceived attractiveness   | -.32***            | .39***            | -.51***           | —                 | .03               | -.23*             | .06               | -.25*             | -.13              | -.08              | -.08              |
| 5. Parents' valuing of appearance  | .08                | -.04              | .10               | -.03              | —                 | .36***            | .25**             | .24*              | .24*              | .28**             | .19               |
| 6. Parents' conditional acceptance | .19*               | -.27**            | .28**             | -.24*             | .45***            | —                 | .27**             | .38***            | .23*              | .23*              | .13               |
| 7. Peers' valuing of appearance    | .26**              | -.17              | .11               | .05               | .33***            | .23*              | —                 | .62***            | .67***            | .60***            | .49***            |
| 8. Peers' conditional acceptance   | .46***             | -.38***           | .34***            | -.31**            | .12               | .29**             | .40***            | —                 | .67***            | .61***            | .44***            |
| 9. Media internalization           | .36***             | -.19*             | .18               | -.17              | .26**             | .14               | .43***            | .52***            | —                 | .77***            | .43***            |
| 10. Media Pressures                | .48***             | -.24*             | .14               | -.19*             | .19*              | .27**             | .38***            | .55***            | .65***            | —                 | .37***            |
| 11. Media Information              | .33***             | -.04              | .14               | -.12              | .19*              | .14               | .30**             | .38***            | .46***            | .54**             | —                 |

*Note.* Appearance-RS = Appearance-based rejection sensitivity; Personal-RS = Personal rejection sensitivity. Means within columns not sharing a common subscript differ at  $p < .05$  using the Bonferroni method. Correlations for men are below the diagonal; correlations for women are above the diagonal.  
\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 2**  
Results of Separate Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Appearance-RS

|  | Parent influence model |        |        | Peer influence model |        |        | Media influence model |        |        | sr <sup>2</sup> |
|--|------------------------|--------|--------|----------------------|--------|--------|-----------------------|--------|--------|-----------------|
|  | Step 1                 | Step 2 | Step 3 | Step 1               | Step 2 | Step 3 | Step 1                | Step 2 | Step 3 |                 |
| Self-esteem                            | -.25**                 | -.20** | -.21** | -.25**               | -.05   | -.04   | -.25**                | -.07   | -.06   | .00             |
| Personal-RS                            | .23**                  | .22**  | .21**  | .23**                | .16*   | .15*   | .23**                 | .24*** | .23*** | .04             |
| Self-perceived attractiveness          | -.08                   | -.09   | -.09   | -.08                 | -.08   | -.09   | -.08                  | -.09   | -.10   | .01             |
| Gender                                 |                        | .25*** | .25*** |                      | .19*** | .19*** |                       | .07    | .08    | .00             |
| Parents' valuing of appearance         |                        | .05    | .03    |                      |        |        |                       |        |        |                 |
| Parents' conditional acceptance        |                        | .09    | .02    |                      |        |        |                       |        |        |                 |
| Peers' valuing of appearance           |                        |        |        | .11                  |        | .11    |                       |        |        | .00             |
| Peers' conditional acceptance          |                        |        |        | .43***               |        | .27**  |                       |        |        | .02             |
| Media internalization                  |                        |        |        |                      |        |        |                       | .14    | .15*   | .01             |
| Media pressures                        |                        |        |        |                      |        |        |                       | .40*** | .37*** | .05             |
| Media information                      |                        |        |        |                      |        |        |                       | -.06   | .07    | .00             |
| Gender × parent valuing of appearance  |                        |        | .04    |                      |        |        |                       |        |        |                 |
| Gender × parent conditional acceptance |                        |        | .09    |                      |        |        |                       |        |        |                 |
| Gender × peer valuing of appearance    |                        |        |        |                      |        | -.05   |                       |        |        | .00             |
| Gender × peer conditional acceptance   |                        |        |        |                      |        | .25**  |                       |        |        | .02             |
| Gender × media internalization         |                        |        |        |                      |        |        |                       |        | .13    | .01             |
| Gender × media pressures               |                        |        |        |                      |        |        |                       |        | .03    | .00             |
| Gender × media information             |                        |        |        |                      |        |        |                       |        | -.08   | .00             |

Note. Regression coefficients reported above represent standardized betas. sr<sup>2</sup> = squared semi-partial correlation based on Step 3 of each model. Appearance-RS = Appearance-based rejection sensitivity. \*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001.

Model 1: Step 1 R<sup>2</sup> = .21, F(3, 216) = 19.22, p < .001  
 Step 2 ΔR<sup>2</sup> = .09, ΔF(3, 213) = 8.79, p < .001  
 Step 3 ΔR<sup>2</sup> = .01, ΔF(2, 211) = .82, p = .442

Model 2: Step 1 R<sup>2</sup> = .21, F(3, 216) = 19.22, p < .001  
 Step 2 ΔR<sup>2</sup> = .26, ΔF(3, 213) = 34.55, p < .001  
 Step 3 ΔR<sup>2</sup> = .02, ΔF(2, 211) = 4.60, p < .05

Model 3: Step 1 R<sup>2</sup> = .21, F(3, 216) = 19.22, p < .001  
 Step 2 ΔR<sup>2</sup> = .26, ΔF(4, 212) = 26.0, p < .001  
 Step 3 ΔR<sup>2</sup> = .02, ΔF(3, 209) = 2.57, p < .06

that these general sociocultural factors are uniquely associated with this dispositional tendency.

Results from both the peer influence model and the full model confirmed the relation between peer conditional acceptance and Appearance-RS for women in particular. Differences in socialization experiences may help to explain the differential impact of sociocultural influences on women's and men's sensitivity to appearance rejection. From an early age, girls are socialized to focus on their external appearance and on their interpersonal qualities and relationships, whereas boys are socialized to focus on their agentic qualities and abilities (Eagly, 1987; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Accordingly, whereas men's social power is heavily derived from competence-based actions, women's social power is largely derived from appearance-based actions. Indeed, a variety of social and economic rewards are available to women who strive toward physical appearance standards in both interpersonal and professional contexts (Engeln-Maddox, 2006). There is also well-documented evidence for backlash toward women who fail to conform to feminine roles and ideals (Rudman, 1988; Rudman & Glick, 1999). Based on such findings, it is plausible that women receive more messages from sociocultural sources than men about how intricately linked their appearance is to being accepted by others.

Our findings also connect to the literature on body image concerns and Objectification Theory in particular (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Similar to self-objectification, Appearance-RS involves adopting an observer's perspective on one's physical self and being concerned with how one's appearance is perceived and evaluated by others. Unlike self-objectification, however, Appearance-RS is not necessarily a consequence of sexual objectification and is not limited strictly to women's experiences, but may be experienced by both women and men. In the present study, we found a stronger relationship between peer conditional acceptance and women's Appearance-RS, suggesting that this sociocultural factor may be a key to understanding women's greater appearance concerns. Indeed, outcomes that have often been discussed in the literature in relation to women and self-objectification, such as eating disorders and body shame, might also be due, in part, to peer influences that contribute to greater sensitivity to appearance rejection among women. Future research could examine the relation between self-objectification and Appearance-RS and investigate the unique effects of each in predicting psychological outcomes.

Results from the media influence model and the full model revealed that internalizing media appearance ideals and feeling media pressure to look attractive were related to greater Appearance-RS among women and men. These results are consistent with the finding that body dissatisfaction among men has nearly tripled over the past three decades, from 15% in 1972 to 43% in 1997 (Pope, Phillips, & Olivardia, 2000). Media influence may be one culprit; for example, Thompson and Cafri (2007) found that men

exposed to ads illustrating the male body ideal (a mesomorphic physique) reported greater body dissatisfaction than men exposed to neutral ads. Based on such findings, it follows that media internalization and pressures to look attractive would be related to Appearance-RS among both women and men.

Contrary to predictions, parental influence was not found to be a significant predictor of Appearance-RS. This finding was somewhat surprising because considerable evidence has pointed to the critical role that parents play in a child's appearance and body image concerns (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003; McKinley, 1999). The present findings are, however, consistent with research by Shroff and Thompson (2006), who found that peer and media influences were stronger predictors of body image and eating disturbances among adolescent girls than was parental influence. One explanation for the lack of significant findings for parental influence may be related to the measurement of Appearance-RS. Eight of the 10 scenarios in the Appearance-RS scale referred to interpersonal situations involving an intimate or romantic partner or encounter; the other two scenarios involved looking at one's appearance/body in the mirror and anxiously expecting others to reject them based on their looks. None of these scenarios represented potential situations with parental figures. It is plausible that the phenomenological experience of rejection from parents based on appearance is different from rejection from romantic others or peers. Thus, one could imagine that the circumstances under which parental influence on Appearance-RS would be salient might differ from the circumstances presented in the scenarios in the Appearance-RS scale. The role of parental influence in the activation of Appearance-RS remains an open question, and future research should seek to further clarify the role of this and other sociocultural factors in the manifestation of this dispositional tendency.

Several limitations of the present research should be acknowledged. First, although the regression models reported in this study represent predictive models, experimental investigations are required so as to determine cause and effect relations among these sociocultural variables and Appearance-RS. Although we think it is likely that sociocultural factors contribute to Appearance-RS, it is also possible that the more sensitive a person is to appearance rejection, the more susceptible they may be, or selectively expose themselves to, peer or media influence related to appearance. Future studies could use longitudinal designs to help determine whether the relations between Appearance-RS and sociocultural factors are causal and/or bidirectional.

Second, we had a limited sample of participants of color, making it difficult to draw any firm conclusions about potential ethnic differences in Appearance-RS; future research should include a more ethnically inclusive sample to allow for broader ethnic comparisons. Third, we did not collect data about participants' sexual identity, which may be important to consider given that some of the peer questions

assessed perceptions of conditional acceptance from members of the other sex. Without such information, we do not know whether participants were interested in conforming to appearance-related norms because of their heterosexual identity. Fourth, to bolster our argument that sociocultural factors influence Appearance-RS, it might have been more appropriate to ask participants to report retrospectively on their parent, peer, and media influences while growing up, rather than framing these questions in the present tense. Fifth, other sociocultural factors (e.g., history of appearance-based teasing, experiences of disfigurement, sibling influence) might contribute to Appearance-RS and should be assessed in future research.

To further understand the development of Appearance-RS, researchers could also examine the influence of sociocultural factors in Appearance-RS across age groups. Women in adolescence and young adulthood may be particularly sensitive to how they are perceived by others because their bodies undergo changes during this period (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). As women age, however, they may focus less on their appearance and more on other areas of life. Indeed, women in later life often report renewed interest in other areas (e.g., family, community, personal interests), and women in their 50s, relative to women of other ages, report the highest quality of life, which is related to feelings of autonomy and self-determination (Mitchell & Helson, 1990). It is possible, then, that women in later life may experience less Appearance-RS than younger women, for whom physical appearance may be more central to their self-esteem and social relationships.

It is also possible, however, that Appearance-RS may not be tied to women's age per se, but to specific life transitions that involve the formation or dissolution of significant relationships. Although young adults are often focused on attracting mates and may therefore be anxious about the possibility of being rejected based on appearance, some women in later life may experience heightened Appearance-RS in response to separation, divorce, or feelings of insecurity in their relationships. For example, women who feel insecure in their relationships may feel more sensitive to the possibility of being rejected by their partner as their appearance declines. To maintain the relationship, they may feel added pressure to look young and attractive. In fact, men who perceive their spouses to be declining in physical attractiveness, while they themselves are not, are likely to report sexual problems and dissatisfaction in their marriages (Margolin & White, 1987). Thus, women's concerns about appearance and rejection might be related to high levels of Appearance-RS even as they age, depending on their existing relationships.

Recent research has documented several affective, cognitive, and behavioral consequences of Appearance-RS. The present study provided evidence for specific sociocultural factors that are related to Appearance-RS. Specifically, the more women perceived their peers to be conditionally accepting of them based on appearance, the greater

was their sensitivity to appearance-based rejection. In addition, for both women and men, internalizing media appearance ideals and feeling pressured to meet such ideals were related to Appearance-RS. Future research should continue to investigate the correlates and consequences of Appearance-RS across diverse age and ethnic groups so as to better understand how and when Appearance-RS might be reduced and to improve people's intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences.

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