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Abstract

Our study examined similarities and differences in women's and men's comparison tendencies and perfection beliefs when evaluating their face, body shape, and physical abilities, as well as how these tendencies and beliefs relate to their body esteem. College students (90 women and 88 men) completed the Body Esteem Scale (Franzoi & Shields, 1984) and answered questions concerning their social comparison and temporal comparison tendencies related to face, body shape, and physical abilities evaluations as well as personal perfection body beliefs. As predicted, women were more likely than men to compare their face and bodies to other same-sex persons whom they perceived as having either similar or better physical qualities than themselves in those body domains, with their most likely comparison tendency being upward social comparison. More men than women held body-perfection beliefs for all three body domains, and men were most likely to rely on future temporal comparison when evaluating their body shape. Comparison tendencies and perfection beliefs also were differentially related to women's and men's body esteem; whereas women rely on self-critical social comparison strategies associated with negative body esteem, men's comparison strategies and perfection beliefs are more self-hopeful. Implications for practitioners treating body-image issues are discussed.

Keywords: body image, objectification, physical appearance, self perception, social comparison, human sex differences

Exploring Body Comparison Tendencies: Women Are Self-Critical Whereas Men Are Self-Hopeful

While women and men often occupy the same social worlds, there is abundant evidence that similar social contexts can be perceived and experienced differently by women and men (see Yoder & Kahn, 2003). Nowhere is our gendered world more apparent than when we consider how people perceive and experience their physical selves. Like many cultures, North American culture places a much higher premium on women's physical attractiveness than on men's (Li, Valentine, & Patel, 2011; Townsend & Wasserman, 1997). Starting in childhood, the average woman is taught that her body as an object of beauty will be closely scrutinized and will often determine how others judge her overall social value (e.g., Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Impett, Henson, Breines, Schooler, & Tolman, 2011; Swami et al., 2010). Various feminist scholars and social scientists contend that this societal objectification of the female body is shaped by patriarchal structures and gendered beliefs that results in many women perceiving their bodies from an outsider's perspective, that is, as an object to be evaluated (e.g., Franzoi, 1995; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; McKinley, 2011; Moradi & Huang, 2008). Although cultural scrutiny of the male body as a beauty object has increased over the past couple of decades (e.g., Baghurst, Hollander, Nardella, & Haff, 2006), men are still held less personally accountable to attractiveness standards, and thus, they are less attentive to those standards than are women (e.g., Franzoi & Klaiber, 2007; van den Berg, Paxton, & Keery, 2007). Women's greater attention to, and critical scrutiny of, their bodies as beauty objects is likely a key factor in explaining their more negative body esteem relative to men's (e.g., Feingold & Mazzella, 1998; Franzoi & Chang 2000; Tiggemann & Rothblum, 1997).

Given these documented gender differences in emphasizing physical attractiveness standards and the associated gender disparities in body esteem, in the present study we sought to determine whether women and men differ in the types of comparison standards they use in judging three important body domains and in their beliefs about personally achieving body perfection in these domains. Further, given that people differ in their attentiveness to physical appearance standards (e.g., Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, Reynard, Skouteris, & McCabe, in press), we also examined whether individual differences in using different comparison standards and individual differences in personal body perfection beliefs are related to how women and men evaluate relevant body esteem dimensions for their sex.

Body Comparison Tendencies and Perfection Expectations

Two of the most fundamental information avenues for judging the self are social comparison and temporal comparison (Festinger, 1954; Summerville & Roese, 2008). Whereas social comparison involves judging our current selves in relation to others, temporal comparison involves evaluating our current selves against ourselves either at some time in the past or at some time in the future. Research indicates that our preferred social comparison targets are similar others when accurate self-appraisals are sought, but that better others are targeted (upward social comparison) when we strive to improve ourselves and worse others (downward social comparison), when we desire to recover lost self-esteem (Wilson & Ross, 2000). Although upward social comparison can lead to self-improvement, it frequently results in a loss of self-esteem, especially when the higher standard is difficult to attain (Collins, 1996). Regarding past and future temporal comparisons, although they can be motivated by a desire for accurate self-appraisals, they also can be driven by a desire for self-enhancement or hopeful self-improvement (e.g., Wilson & Ross, 2001; Zell & Alicke, 2009).

By definition, social comparison involves thinking about information about other people or selves in relation to the current self, thus taking an outsider—or objectified—perspective on the self (e.g., Cohen & Hoshino-Browne, 2009). Because of the greater cultural fixation on the female body compared to the male body as a beauty object, women should be more likely than men to perceive their bodies from an outsider perspective and to engage in a relatively negative self-critical comparison process regarding their bodies. Of the five discussed comparisons in which people engage, upward and similar social comparisons are more likely than future and past temporal comparisons and downward social comparison to encompass both this outsider perspective and self-criticism (Collins, 1996; Tesser, 1988). This pattern is especially likely when the comparison process involves body domains associated with difficult-to-attain physical attractiveness standards (Krahé & Krause, 2010; Tiggemann & Polivy, 2010). For these reasons, women should be more likely than men to rely on upward social comparison and similar social comparison when evaluating their body domains associated with physical appearance, and they should experience more body dissatisfaction as a result of such comparison tendencies. Due to these same cultural factors, women should also have more pessimistic expectations about achieving body perfection than men.

A related set of gender expectations is that men should be more likely than women to be optimistic and less self-critical when evaluating their bodies. This expectation is based on research indicating that men are more likely than women to perceive themselves in the best possible light, a cognitive strategy known as the *self-serving bias* (Miller & Ross, 1975). At least two studies have found evidence of this self-serving bias by men when young adults evaluate their bodies (Franzoi, Kessenich, & Sugrue, 1989; Powell, Matacin, & Stuart, 2001). The social reality underlying these findings is that men not only are less likely than women to regularly

encounter same-sex body ideals in the mass media that might undermine optimistic expectations of achieving perfection (Dittmar, 2005; Murnen, Smolak, Mills, & Good, 2003), but also are less likely to receive the cultural message that matching them is critical in others' evaluations of them (Schooler & Ward, 2006). Based on this evidence, and despite a growing cultural trend to scrutinize male upper-body muscularity (e.g., Ridgeway & Tylka, 2005), men's more hopeful body outlook should result in more men than women believing that they can attain body perfection.

Gender-based physical appearance standards should not appreciably motivate either men or women to engage in downward social comparison when evaluating their bodies. Men are unlikely to seek the self-esteem boost possible through downward comparison because, as already outlined, they are given a "cultural break" regarding physical attractiveness standards and should be relatively unthreatened by how their bodies "measure up." For women, even when they are threatened by gender-based appearance standards, gender socialization and cultural beauty expectations should motivate them to persist in upward and similar social comparisons instead of resorting to downward comparison to recover their sense of self-worth. Finally, past research does not lead to clear expectations regarding women's and men's temporal comparison tendencies when evaluating their bodies. As such, our study will simply explore gender similarities and differences regarding past and future comparison tendencies rather than propose specific hypotheses.

Two important body domains that figure prominently into physical attractiveness judgments are people's facial features and their body shape (Langlois et al., 2000; Streeter & McBurney, 2003). In contrast, a body domain that has much less to do with physical attractiveness is physical abilities. Not coincidentally, these three body domains of facial

features, body shape, and physical abilities correspond to the three gender-specific dimensions of body esteem identified by Franzoi and Shields' (1984) factor analysis of young adults' body esteem. As such, Franzoi and Shields' (1984) research and their multidimensional measure of body esteem provided the methodological justification for the current study. According to Franzoi and Shields, the *physical attractiveness* dimension for men and corresponding *sexual attractiveness* dimension for women contain items that are used to judge physical appeal and "good looks" through evaluation of facial features and other body aspects. The *upper body strength* dimension for men and corresponding *weight concern* dimension of body esteem for women contain items that evaluate body shape. Finally, the *physical condition* dimensions for both men and women comprise items that evaluate physical abilities. The following hypotheses examine how women's and men's comparison tendencies and perfection beliefs are related to these three gender-specific body esteem dimensions and their associated body domains.

Hypotheses

The thesis underlying our study's hypotheses rests on a social-contextual approach toward gender (Yoder & Kahn, 2003) regarding how perceptions of the physical self are shaped within Westernized cultures like the United States. Existing research suggests that whereas American women live within a gendered social context that shapes a relatively self-critical orientation toward their physical appearance that is associated with negative body esteem (Franzoi & Klaiber, 2007), American men's gendered social context allows for a relatively optimistic or self-serving bias orientation that is associated with positive body esteem (Franzoi et al., 1989; Powell et al., 2001). The different expectations and judgments of women's and men's bodies in this gendered world and the resulting effects on perceptions of the physical self lead to the following hypotheses for the three body domains of face, body shape, and physical abilities.

Between-gender comparisons related to the physical self. Because facial features and body shape figure prominently in physical attractiveness judgments (e.g., Langlois et al., 2000; Streeter & McBurney, 2003), we hypothesized that women would report a greater tendency than men to engage in similar social comparison and upward social comparison when evaluating their facial features and body shape, but not when evaluating their physical abilities. Specifically then we hypothesized that the more critically judgmental mode of upward social comparison would be the most likely comparison mode for women when evaluating their face and body shape. No specific hypotheses were proposed for men's most likely comparison mode.

Because the masculine ideal for face and body shape is both less stringent and less salient for men than it is for women, and also because men tend to exhibit more over-confidence and unrealistic optimism than women (e.g., Lin & Raghubir, 2005; Pallier, 2003), we hypothesized that more men than women would report believing that perfection is personally attainable for them in regards to achieving their ideal body shape and ideal facial features. We further hypothesized that men's expected body optimism would result in men being more likely than women to believe that physical ability perfection is personally attainable.

Within-gender variability regarding body esteem. Our second set of hypotheses focused on the influence that comparison tendencies and perfection beliefs in a particular body domain would have on body esteem in that domain for women and for men. Among women, we hypothesized that the tendency to engage in similar or upward social comparison when evaluating either body shape or facial features would be negatively related to body esteem in these respective body domains. We expected none of the other comparison modes to be related to these two female body esteem dimensions. Among men, we hypothesized that upward social comparison tendencies would be negatively related to male body esteem. This latter hypothesis is

based on two lines of research indicating that upward social comparison can cause negative self-evaluations (Collins, 1996) and that cultural scrutiny of the male body has become more pronounced (e.g., Baghurst et al., 2006). We hypothesized that no other comparison modes would be related to male body esteem.

For both women and men, we hypothesized that those who believe that perfection is personally attainable in a particular body domain would report more positive body esteem in that domain than would individuals who do not believe that perfection is attainable. Regarding comparison tendencies when evaluating physical abilities and their relation to physical condition body esteem, we did not expect any significant relationships here for either men or women. This is so because, unlike the body domains of body shape and facial features that figure prominently in physical attractiveness judgments, it is unlikely that physical prowess is that central to most young adults' self-conceptions. Therefore, it was unlikely that any of the comparison tendencies would have a significant or predictable impact on how young adults assess their physical conditioning.

Method

Participants and Procedure

A total of 178 college students (90 women and 88 men) attending a Midwestern urban university received extra course credit in psychology for their participation in a study described as surveying students' opinions about different topics. Participants' mean age was 18.85 (*SD* = .97), ranging from 18 to 23, with no significant gender differences in age, $t(176) = 0.75$, $p = .45$. Their ethnicity was 85% White ($n = 151$), 6% Asian ($n = 11$), 3% Latino ($n = 5$), 2% Black ($n = 4$), and 4% mixed race ($n = 7$). Women's mean Body Mass Index (BMI: Kg/meters^2) was 23.29 (*SD* = 4.29); men's, 24.04 (*SD* = 3.31).

Data from women was collected using paper-and-pencil questionnaires, whereas data from men was collected 2 months later using the web-based site, Survey Monkey (surveymonkey.com). A literature search found no evidence that paper-and-pencil surveys yield different reliabilities or response sets than internet-based surveys (Mangunkusumo et al., 2005; Steenhuis, Serra, Minderaa, & Hartman, 2009). The measures used in the study were presented in the order listed below, followed by the demographic measures.

Measures

Body comparison tendencies. A series of one-item measures assessed the tendency to compare a specific body domain (body shape, facial features, and physical abilities) using past temporal comparison, future temporal comparison, upward social comparison, similar social comparison, and downward social comparison using the same 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*a great deal*). For past temporal comparison, respondents were asked to indicate "the degree to which you compare yourself to the way you were in the past." For future temporal comparison, respondents rated "the degree to which you compare yourself to the way you hope to be in the future." For the three social comparison measures, respondents noted "the degree to which you compare yourself to someone who is *better than* [or *very similar to* or *worse than*] you."

Body perfection beliefs. For each of the body domains of body shape, facial features, and physical abilities, a one-item measure asked, "Is perfection here attainable for you?" Participants' responses to this question were coded by two independent judges into the categories of 1 (*yes*) or 2 (*no*), with any qualifying responses for achieving perfection (e.g., "My waist could be perfect but I'm not sure about my hips") being categorized as a "no" response. The inter-rater agreement in this categorization process was 100%.

Body Esteem Scale. The Body Esteem Scale (BES; Franzoi & Shields, 1984) is composed of three gender-specific dimensions and consists of 35 body parts and functions rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*have strong negative feelings*) to 5 (*have strong positive feelings*), with 3 being a neutral midpoint. The three female BES subscales measure attitudes toward *sexual attractiveness* (α = .77 in the present study), *weight concern* (α = .89), and *physical condition* (α = .85). In contrast, the three male BES subscales measure attitudes toward *physical attractiveness* (α = .83), *upper body strength* (α = .84), and *physical condition* (α = .87). Previous research demonstrated that both the female and male subscales are adequately valid and reliable as well as relatively free from social desirable responding (Cecil & Stanley 1997; Franzoi, 1994).

Results

Between-Gender Comparisons Related to the Physical Self

Separate mixed between-within subjects ANOVAs were conducted to examine differences in the degree to which young adults evaluated their body shape, facial features, and physical abilities using upward social comparison, similar social comparison, downward social comparison, past temporal comparison, and future temporal comparison. All follow-up analyses controlled for family-wise error using Bonferroni corrections at the .05 significance level (Shaffer, 1995).

Facial features. For facial features, there was a significant interaction between sex and comparison tendencies, $\Lambda = .89$, $F(4,173) = 4.99$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .10$, which is a moderate effect size. Follow-up pair-wise between-group comparisons are presented in Table 1. As hypothesized, women were significantly more likely than men to engage in upward social comparison, $t(176) = -3.47$, $p < .001$, and similar social comparison, $t(176) = -2.18$, $p = .03$,

when evaluating their facial features. No other significant gender differences were found among the other comparison tendencies.

Pair-wise within-subject comparisons for facial features are also presented in Table 1. As hypothesized, the within-subjects effects were significant, F (4,356) = 19.42, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .18$, with women being significantly more likely to engage in upward social comparison than in past temporal comparison, future temporal comparison, similar social comparison, or downward social comparison. For men, the within-subjects effects were also significant, $F(4,348) = 6.87$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .07$. As presented in Table 1, men were significantly more likely to engage in future temporal comparison than in past temporal comparison, but their tendency to engage in future temporal comparison was not significantly greater than their tendency to engage in upward or similar social comparisons.

Body shape. For body shape, there was a significant interaction between sex and comparison tendencies, $\Lambda = .89$, $F(4,170) = 5.35$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .11$, which is a moderate effect size. In examining follow-up pair-wise between-group comparisons (see Table 1), as hypothesized, women were significantly more likely than men to engage in upward social comparison, $t(175) = -4.23$, $p < .001$, and similar social comparison, $t(175) = -2.86$, $p = .005$, when evaluating their body shape. No other gender differences were found among the other comparison tendencies.

Pair-wise within-subject comparisons for female body shape (see Table 1) were significant, $F(4,356) = 33.66$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .27$, and as hypothesized, women were significantly more likely to engage in upward social comparison than in past temporal comparison, future temporal comparison, similar social comparison, or downward social comparison. Similar analyses for men were also significant, $F(4,336) = 22.13$, $p < .001$, partial η^2

= .22, with men being significantly more likely to engage in future temporal comparison than in past temporal comparison and upward, similar, and downward social comparison.

Physical abilities. Finally, for physical abilities, as expected, there was no significant interaction between sex and comparison tendencies, $\Lambda = .97$, $F(4,172) = 1.17$, $p = .33$. In other words, consistent with our expectations, women and men did not differ in their comparison tendencies when evaluating their physical abilities.

Perfection beliefs. Chi-square tests were conducted to test for gender differences in perfection beliefs regarding the three body domains. As hypothesized, more men than women were likely to believe that perfection was personally attainable for their body shape (77% vs. 36%, $\chi^2(2)= 36.35$, $p < .001$), facial features (48% vs. 27%, $\chi^2(2)= 12.07$, $p < .005$), and physical abilities (71% vs. 51%, $\chi^2 (2) = 27.15$, $p < .001$).

Within-Gender Variability Regarding Body Esteem

Because Franzoi and Shields (1984) found that women and men have their own unique gender-specific body esteem dimensions, we separately analyzed female and male body esteem. We first used partial correlation analyses to examine whether individual young adults' beliefs about personally attaining perfection in a particular body domain or their degree of upward, downward, and similar social comparison and future temporal and past temporal comparison tendencies was related to their self-evaluations of that body domain after their body mass index was taken into account. Those body domains having multiple variables related to body esteem in that domain were then subjected to follow-up stepwise regression analyses to determine which of these variables contributed unique variance to body esteem in that domain. It should be noted that in all these analyses the measures of comparison tendencies and perfection beliefs were specific to a body domain and its corresponding dimension of body esteem.

Women's body esteem. Regarding women's *facial features* and consistent with our hypotheses, the partial correlation coefficients (see Table 1) indicated that both similar and upward social comparison tendencies were significantly and negatively related to sexual attractiveness body esteem. However, counter to our expectations, there was no significant relationship between women believing that facial perfection was personally attainable and their sexual attractiveness body esteem. For the follow-up stepwise regression analysis, BMI was entered in step one, and upward social comparison and similar social comparison were entered in step two, $F(3, 86) = 6.50$, $p < .01$, $R = .43$, $R^2 = .18$. Only upward social comparison accounted for significant variance in sexual attractiveness body esteem after controlling for BMI variance, $\beta = -.51$, $t = -3.92$, $p < .001$.

Turning to women's *body shape* and as predicted, women's tendency to engage in both similar and upward social comparisons were significantly and negatively related to weight concern body esteem. Counter to expectations, there was no significant relationship between women's body shape perfection beliefs and weight concern body esteem. Unexpectedly, both past and future temporal comparison tendencies were significantly and negatively related to weight concern body esteem. For the stepwise regression analysis, upward social comparison, similar social comparison, future temporal comparison, and past temporal comparison were entered in step two, $F(5, 84) = 10.15$, $p < .001$, $R = .61$, $R^2 = .38$. After BMI variance was accounted for, only upward social comparison, $\beta = -.40$, $t = -4.31$, $p < .001$, and future temporal comparison, $\beta = -.26$, $t = -2.03$, $p < .05$, accounted for significant variance in weight concern body esteem.

Considering women's *physical abilities* and as hypothesized, the more women believed that physical abilities perfection was personally attainable, the more they reported positive

physical condition body esteem. As expected, none of the other partial correlation coefficients were significant. Given these nonfindings, a regression analysis was not warranted.

Men's body esteem. Turning to men's *facial features*, as depicted in Table 2, and as hypothesized, the more men believed that facial perfection was personally attainable, the more positive was their physical attractiveness body esteem. None of the comparison tendencies, including upward social comparison, was significantly related to physical attractiveness body esteem.

Considering men's *body shape* and as predicted, the more men believed that body shape perfection was personally attainable, the more they reported positive upper body strength body esteem. As expected, upward social comparison was significantly and negatively related to upper body strength body esteem, and none of the other comparison tendencies was significantly related to this male body esteem dimension. In the stepwise regression analysis with BMI entered in the first step and perfection beliefs and upward social comparison entered in step two, $F(3, 83) = 6.32$, $p < .001$, $R = .43$, $R^2 = .19$, only upward social comparison accounted for significant variance in male upper body strength body esteem, $\beta = -.34$, $t = -3.35$, $p < .001$.

Regarding men's *physical abilities* and counter to expectations, there was no significant relationship between physical condition body esteem and perfection beliefs. None of the comparison tendencies was significantly related to this male body esteem dimension.

Discussion

The results of the present study suggest that the well documented problematic body image issues found more often among women than men is related to women relying more on self-critical comparison strategies when evaluating their physical appearance and men relying more on self-hopeful strategies. As hypothesized, we found that women are much more likely

than men to habitually compare their face and bodies to other same-sex targets whom they perceive as having either similar or better physical qualities than themselves in those body domains—with women's most likely comparison tendency being upward social comparison. Also as expected, we found that significantly fewer women than men were likely to believe that they could attain body perfection in their face, body shape, and physical abilities, which is consistent with our thesis that women have a more self-critical body orientation than men.

Regarding how comparison tendencies and perfection beliefs relate to body esteem, we found that women's tendency to engage in either upward or similar social comparison when evaluating their face and body shape was negatively related to their body esteem in those domains, with further analysis suggesting that upward social comparison is most detrimental to women's body esteem. We found a similar association for men regarding their own body shape evaluations and their upward social comparison tendencies. Further, for men more than for women, individual differences in perfection beliefs for a particular body domain predicted body esteem in that domain.

Gender Differences in Comparisons

When evaluating body shape and facial features, the four hypotheses stating that women would be more likely than men to rely on similar and upward social comparisons were all supported. In other words, our findings suggest that women are significantly more likely than men to compare their facial features and their body shape to both similar others and to those whose face and body shapes are subjectively perceived as better than their own. Regarding the comparison tendency that women are most likely to use when evaluating either their body shape or their facial features, as predicted, our results indicate that it is upward social comparison.

These findings suggest that when evaluating the two body domains most associated with female beauty, the comparison strategy that women are most likely to employ is not the one that Festinger (1954) asserted is likely to yield the most accurate information about the self, namely similar social comparison. Instead, women are most likely to rely on the harshest and the most self-critical of all the comparison strategies: upward social comparison (Collins, 1996). This choice is not surprising given that facial features and body shape play a prominent role in people's judgments of physical attractiveness and romantic desirability, and because the female body is more objectified in these body domains than is the male body (Franzoi, 1995; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This greater degree of critical self-scrutiny by women, compared to men, often causes women's body shame and body guilt (e.g., Calogero & Pina, 2011) and may also reflect a competitive desire among women to "size themselves up" against other same-sex peers in the pursuit of the feminine body ideal (James, 2000). A number of researchers contend that women's self-criticism of their bodies, especially related to weight, is a key element in the feminine gender role (e.g., Strahan, Wilson, Cressman, & Buote, 2006; Tiggemann & Rothblum, 1997).

What have we learned about men’s comparison strategies? When men self-evaluate the two body aspects closely associated with physical appearance, they are certainly less self-critical than women. When evaluating their facial features, men relied relatively equally on future temporal comparison, upward social comparison, and similar social comparison. However, we did find that when evaluating their body shape, men were most likely to compare themselves to how they hoped their bodies would be in the future. Given that past research suggests that future temporal comparison is often motivated by a desire for self-enhancement or hopeful self-improvement (e.g., Wilson & Ross, 2000; Zell & Alicke, 2009), this finding for body shape can

be interpreted as being consistent with our thesis that men's body orientation is more self-hopeful than self-critical.

As expected, when evaluating physical abilities, no gender differences were found in comparison tendencies. This finding suggests that women's greater tendency than men's to be self-critical when evaluating their bodies is reserved for the body's shape and the face, the two body domains associated with physical attractiveness. This focus makes sense because cultural scrutiny of the female body has historically concentrated on how it looks as a static beauty object and not on how it moves as an instrument of action (Strahan et al., 2008), and therefore, evaluations of physical ability are probably not nearly as salient to most young adults' daily experiences as are physical appearance evaluations.

Gender Differences in Perfection Beliefs

Our analysis of participants' beliefs regarding the likelihood that they could personally attain perfection in these three body domains suggests that men have a more hopeful—and self-enhancing—view of their physical selves than women. Significantly more men than women believed that perfection was personally attainable for their body shape (77% vs. 36%), facial features (48% vs. 27%), and physical abilities (71% vs. 51%). In other words, in all body domains, men were more likely than women to believe that they could be perfect if they so chose. Indeed, men were about twice as likely as women to believe that they could attain perfection for the two physical appearance domains of body shape and facial features, which are the two domains in which women's most preferred comparison mode was upward social comparison.

One of the basic social facts underlying the thesis of the current study is that men's greater feelings of physical self-optimism are largely due to the male body being much less

subject to critical cultural scrutiny than the female body (Dittmar, 2005; Murnen et al., 2003). This greater cultural luxury of feeling less subject to physical perfection standards is one entitlement of male privilege that allows men to maintain inflated evaluations of their bodies that bolsters their sense of physical self-efficacy. Although men can still fall prey to cultural attractiveness standards (Frederick et al., 2007; Hobza & Rochlen, 2009), as a group they are still more protected in this regard than are women.

Variability Regarding Body Esteem

For the two female body domains most associated with physical attractiveness judgments (sexual attractiveness and weight concern), we found that the tendency to engage in upward social comparison and similar social comparison were both associated with lower levels of body esteem in those domains. That is, as hypothesized, women who engaged in a good deal of either upward or similar social comparison regarding their facial features and body shape had more negative body attitudes in those respective body domains than women who engaged in less upward or similar social comparison. Our upward social comparison findings for women are consistent with past experimental studies indicating that women's body esteem declines following their exposure to same-sex targets who embody the cultural standards of feminine beauty (e.g., Bessenoff, 2006; Levine & Murnen, 2009). Our results extend those situationally upward social comparison effects by demonstrating that women outside laboratory settings who habitually engage in upward social comparison when evaluating their face or body shape tend to report negative body esteem in those domains of the physical self.

Unexpectedly, we found that future and past temporal comparison tendencies regarding body shape were also negatively associated with women's weight concern. Combined with the already discussed social comparison results, these additional findings suggest that habitually

judging their body shapes against almost any standard is likely to negatively impact women's weight-related body esteem. This understanding may explain why past research has found that women's negativity toward their bodies is primarily associated with weight-related concerns (e.g., Franzoi & Chang, 2000; Grogan, 2008). Our follow-up stepwise regression analysis indicated that upward social comparison and future temporal comparison appear to be the two most harmful of the comparison tendencies for this weight dimension of female body esteem. Regarding future temporal comparison tendencies being negatively related to female weight concern, this may be due to the fact that, as previously noted, female beauty is associated with youthfulness (e.g., Bessenoff & Del Priore, 2007; Feingold, 1992). As such, women of the age sampled here (late teens and early 20s) may realize that their young bodies are at their peak level of physical attractiveness. In the not-too-distant future, due to either slowing metabolisms or having children, these young women may believe that their weight will increase and their current body shape will expand, negatively affecting their physical attractiveness. As such, women who regularly think about how their bodies will look in the future are more likely than others to have a pessimistic mindset regarding the physical self.

When women evaluated their physical abilities, attitudes in this body domain were associated with perfection beliefs. That is, consistent with self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), women who believed that perfection was personally attainable regarding their physical abilities had more positive physical condition body esteem than did women who did not believe that perfection was personally attainable. This was the only body domain in which women's degree of optimism in personally achieving perfection had an influence on their body esteem. Perhaps it is not coincidental that this is also the sole body domain in which there are no readily identifiable or salient cultural standards of perfection for most women.

What was related to men's body esteem? As predicted, and consistent with self-discrepancy theory, men expressed more positive physical attractiveness body esteem and upper body strength body esteem if they believed that perfection was personally attainable rather than unattainable in these two respective body domains. Also as expected, the tendency for men to engage in upward social comparison when evaluating their body shape was negatively related to body esteem regarding upper body strength. Thus, for both men and women, comparing an important body domain against a higher standard appears to negatively impact body esteem. Franzoi and Shields (1984) have described this dimension of men's body esteem as being the one most closely associated with the masculine ideal of the body-as-object. That is, the muscular "V" shaped upper body has historically been our culture's physical representation of male power and virility, and research indicates that male media models have become increasingly more muscular and lean in recent years (Leit, Pope, & Gray, 2001).

Our results suggest that habitual attention to masculine body shape ideals is likely to threaten men's evaluations of their upper body torso. This finding is in line with research indicating that cultural scrutiny of the male body—especially the muscular upper body—is increasing (e.g., Baghurst et al., 2006; Ridgeway & Tylka, 2005) and that some heterosexual men feel pressure to conform to this muscularity ideal to feel good about themselves and impress women (e.g., Frederick et al., 2007). Thus, despite the likelihood that men's self images are more resistant to media representations of the body ideal than are women's (e.g., Murnen et al., 2003; Schooler & Ward, 2006; van den Berg et al., 2007), our results raise the possibility that this particular dimension of male body esteem is most likely to be adversely affected by habitual upward social comparison, even though the relatively hopeful comparison strategy of future temporal comparison is men's preferred comparison mode for this body domain. In this regard,

one avenue for future inquiry would be to more extensively examine the role that media saturation plays in self-evaluations of the physical self. That is, regardless of their sex, do people who encounter fewer ideal body shape images engage in less negative self-evaluations, and is this mediated by lower upward social comparison tendencies?

Finally, whereas male perfection beliefs for the face and body shape did predict body esteem in those respective domains, perfection beliefs for physical abilities were not significantly related to physical condition body esteem. Additional research is necessary to ascertain why this association was not significant. In the interests of fueling such empirical inquiry, one possible reason men's sense of optimism about achieving perfection in the area of physical abilities was not significantly related to physical condition body esteem is that the self-serving bias is most likely to operate in areas where there is less objective evidence available to refute erroneous or self-serving assessments. Due to extensive sports coverage of statistics related to male athletes' physical abilities, including speed and muscularity, most young men may be familiar with what is considered the standards for being perfect in terms of their physical abilities. In contrast, there is no comparable mass media reporting of statistics regarding what facial features or body shape determines whether a man is perfect in these body domains of physical attractiveness. Without such statistics, perhaps young men's sense of optimism about attaining perfection is much more likely to receive a reality check in relation to speed and strength than it is in regard to the body areas associated with physical attractiveness. Indeed, the fact that both men's and women's perfection beliefs are related to body esteem in the physical domains where ideal standards are not that salient for their gender is consistent with our thesis that gender differences and similarities are best understood within the social context in which they are observed. Put simply,

gender differences in body perceptions and evaluations diminish as the relevant contextual factors for women and men become more similar.

Limitations and Conclusions

As in most studies, there are some limitations of the current investigation to keep in mind. First, our sample consisted mostly of White, middle-class Midwestern university students, which limits the generalizability of the findings. A second limitation is that our findings are correlational so that causal conclusions regarding comparison tendencies and body esteem are problematic. Although a host of experimental studies have found that inducing upward social comparison regarding body evaluations triggers more negative body attitudes (e.g., Bessenoff, 2006; Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006), the findings from a study by Trampe, Stapel, and Siero (2005) raises the possibility that being dissatisfied with one's body can trigger more upward and similar social comparison among women. The researchers' explanation for this possible effect is that body dissatisfaction increases the cognitive activation of the self. It is entirely possible that both of these explanations are correct. Comparing one's body to those who more closely match the cultural beauty ideal may trigger body dissatisfaction, which, in turn, may increase the self-relevance of upward comparison targets, creating a vicious cycle of hypercritical social comparison tendencies (Aubrey, 2007). Future research should examine these possible cyclical causal connections. In addition, researchers should explore whether the tendency to engage in specific types of comparison strategies when evaluating specific body domains actually trigger individual differences in body esteem in those domains. Similar research is necessary to determine the causal nature of the relationship between optimistic beliefs about achieving body perfection and body esteem.

The findings from our study represent a significant advancement in understanding the apparent gender differences in self-assessments of the body, especially as it relates to the different cognitive strategies that put women at risk for—and insulate men from—negative body esteem. The sort of destructive self-analysis of the face and body that is more prevalent in women than in men is associated with an outsider perspective on the self that is likely prompted by a cultural fixation on a highly restrictive feminine beauty ideal (McKinley, 2011; Swami et al., 2010; Tolman, Impett, Tracy, & Michael, 2006). In contrast, the manner in which men typically evaluate their bodies may embody what is often identified as the self-serving bias, and men's greater apparent ability to adopt this healthier cognitive strategy most likely reflects the relative lack of cultural fixation on the male body as a beauty object and of consequences for men failing to adhere to body ideals (Franzoi et al., 1989; Powell et al., 2001). Unfortunately for men, the increasing cultural emphasis on the male body as a beauty object increases the likelihood that they will develop a body orientation similar to women's self-critical body orientation, which bodes ill for male body esteem.

Regarding women's body perceptions and evaluations, while there is some evidence that young women's body images have improved over the past several years (e.g., Cash et al., 2004), our current findings indicate that self-criticism remains a defining feature of female body esteem. Perhaps the most important "take-away message" in our current study is that an individual fixation on culturally-derived physical attractiveness standards is a key factor in problematic body images, regardless of whether it is experienced by women or men. This insight should be incorporated into both preventative and therapeutic interventions to help individuals deconstruct the culturally pervasive view of the body as a static beauty object, and instead, encourage a conception of the body as a dynamic instrument of action, moving individuals from a body-as-

object perspective to a body-as-process orientation (Franzoi & Chang, 2000; Franzoi & Klaiber, 2007). Reducing such objectification of the physical self is a key ingredient in any individual's ability to achieve a healthy body image.

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Table 1

Women's and Men's Comparison Tendencies for Facial Features and Body Shape

	Past temporal comparison	Future temporal comparison	Downward social comparison	Similar social comparison	Upward social comparison
FacialFeatures					
Women					
M	3.03 $_{a, C}$	3.50 $_{a, B}$	3.43 $_{a, B}$	4.32$_{a,,B}$	4.78$_{a, A}$
SD	2.15	2.09	2.00	1.72	1.88
Men					
M	3.35 $_{a,, C}$	3.65$_{a, A}$	2.90 $_{a, B}$	3.75$_{b, A}$	3.78$_{b, A}$
SD	1.91	2.04	1.65	1.78	1.90
Body Shape					
Women					
M	4.52 $_{a, D}$	4.92 $_{a, B}$	3.20 $_{a, C}$	4.91$_{a, B}$	5.44$_{a, A}$
SD	1.91	1.82	1.64	1.56	1.45
Men					
M	4.51 $_{a, B}$	5.05 $_{a, A}$	3.25 $_{a, C}$	4.28$_{b, B}$	4.48$_{b, B}$

SD	2.03	1.62	1.35	1.40	1.69

Note. For between-group differences considered in a column, women's and men's comparison means with the different lower-case subscript indicate significant differences. For within-subject differences, means across rows with different upper-case subscripts indicate significant differences. All values represent raw, nonstandardized scores.

Table 2

Within-Gender Body Esteem Correlations Controlling for Body Mass

	Perfection attainable	Past temporal comparison	Future temporal comparison	Downward social comparison	Similar social comparison	Upward social comparison
Women						
Facial Features: Sexual Attractiveness with Body Esteem						
r	.17	-.14	-.17	-.14	-.19	-.42***
Partial *r*	.17	-.07	-.16	-.09	-.23*	-.44***
Body Shape: Weight Concern with Body Esteem						
r	.14	-.22*	-.42***	-.12	-.26*	-.45***
Partial *r*	.15	-.34**	-.44***	-.10	-.30**	-.55***
Physical Abilities: Physical Condition with Body Esteem						
r	.26*	.14	-.02	.14	-.03	-.18
Partial *r*	.26*	.04	-.01	.22	-.03	-.18
Men						
Facial Features: Physical Attractiveness with Body Esteem						
r	.37***	-.04	-.03	-.01	-.13	-.12
Partial *r*	.38***	-.05	-.05	.00	-.14	-.15
Body Shape: Upper Body Strength with Body Esteem						
r	.24*	-.09	-.07	.02	-.10	-.39***
Partial *r*	.25*	-.11	-.07	-.03	-.09	-.36***
Physical Abilities: Physical Condition with Body Esteem						
r	.19	.05	.12	-.03	-.07	-.08
Partial *r*	.19	.17	.18	.00	-.01	-.04

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.