

BUYING A BEAUTY STANDARD OR DREAMING OF A NEW LIFE? EXPECTATIONS ASSOCIATED WITH MEDIA IDEALS

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This study explored college women's ideas regarding how their lives would change if their appearance were consistent with a media-supported female beauty ideal. Participants rated self-generated life changes they associated with looking like a media ideal in terms of likelihood and positivity. Women's tendency to link positive and likely life expectations with looking like the media ideal was significantly associated with both internalization of media ideals and appearance-related dissatisfaction. However, internalization fully mediated the relationship between expectations and appearance-related dissatisfaction. Results are discussed in terms of implications for understanding the nature of internalization and implications for the design of programs targeted at reducing appearance-related dissatisfaction and eating disordered behaviors.

For more than a decade, psychologists have been examining the role that exposure to idealized media images of female beauty plays in girls' and women's often contentious relationship with their own bodies (e.g., Becker, Burwell, Gilman, Herzog, & Hamburg, 2002; Botta, 1999; Harrison & Cantor, 1997; Hawkins, Richards, Granley, & Stein, 2004; Milkie, 1999). There is much evidence that one characteristic of this beauty ideal, as represented by the media, is extreme thinness, which in many cases is well below the medically recommended weight for women (e.g., Owen & Laurel-Seller, 2000; Spitzer, Henderson, & Zivian, 1999; Wiseman, Gray, Mosimann, & Ahrens, 1992). However, concerns go beyond the thinness of this ideal because the women in these images tend to represent a general level of appearance-related perfection that is not attainable by the average woman. The aid of computer retouching and other techniques further increases the gap between media images of women intended to portray beauty ideals and the reality of most women's appearance (Kilbourne, 1994). A recent meta-analysis by Groesz, Levine, and Murnen (2002) examined the immediate impact of brief exposure to media

images of "slender beauty" (p. 3) on girls' and women's body dissatisfaction. Based on 43 independent effect sizes, the authors reported a small but consistent effect of exposure to such images. Exposure was associated with increases in body dissatisfaction, especially among women already struggling with body image-related issues. Other research has tied exposure to these images with decreases in general appearance-related satisfaction (e.g., Crouch & Degelman, 1998; Richins, 1991) and negative affect (e.g., Heinberg & Thompson, 1995; Stice & Shaw, 1994).

The popular sociocultural model of eating disordered behavior (e.g., Stice, 1994) proposes that internalization of this ubiquitous ideal leads to body dissatisfaction, which in turn is linked with eating-related pathology. Indeed, Thompson and Stice (2001) suggested that thin-ideal internalization is empirically supported as a causal risk factor for body image and eating disturbances. However, although thinness is emphasized as necessary for achieving the cultural beauty ideal, thinness alone is not enough. Depending on the individual, a range of other beauty-related attributes may be essential when it comes to meeting the ideal (e.g., flawless skin, well-styled hair, attractive facial features). Indeed, as noted below, the most common instrument for measuring internalization focuses not only on thinness, but also on a general longing to emulate the appearance of women in magazines, movies, and television programs, whether they be a pop star, an athlete, or an actress. Thus, the extreme thinness of the current beauty ideal is a serious concern, but thinness is not the sole attribute of relevance when evaluating the impact of these idealized images.

There are a number of reasons to be concerned with appearance-related dissatisfaction among women. As noted

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above, body-specific dissatisfaction has been linked to disordered eating. However, while many women may internalize a cultural beauty norm and feel dissatisfied with their appearance, most do not develop full-blown eating disorders (Polivy & Herman, 2004). From a feminist perspective, this dissatisfaction with one's appearance is of concern because it can lead women and girls to focus excessively on appearance-related issues—diverting their cognitive and monetary resources away from more empowering activities (Kilbourne, 1994). This perspective is consistent with Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) Objectification Theory. In a review of this theory, the authors focus on women's ongoing experiences of objectification—experiences resulting from a cultural climate in which women's physical appearance is a constant focus of evaluation. Women's awareness that their attractiveness is a primary form of "currency" (p. 178) further encourages a preoccupation with physical appearance. The consequences of this preoccupation may include limitations on cognitive resources, disruptions in one's flow of feelings or behaviors, a reduction in the frequency of peak motivational states, and increases in shame and anxiety (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998; McKinley & Hyde, 1996; Noll & Frederickson, 1998). Appearance-related dissatisfaction has also been linked to decreased social self-esteem and increased social anxiety (Cash & Fleming, 2002).

Because of the important role internalization is proposed to play in fostering appearance-related dissatisfaction among girls and women, this variable has been much explored by researchers. The most valid and commonly used assessment of internalization, the Sociocultural Attitudes Toward Appearance Questionnaire (SATAQ; Heinberg, Thompson, & Stormer, 1995) was designed to assess, in addition to the awareness of a cultural beauty ideal for women, the "endorsement/acceptance of the prevailing message . . . an internalization of the touted standard" (p. 82). More recently, in an article detailing an updated version of this assessment instrument (SATAQ-3), the authors defined internalization as "incorporation of specific values to the point that they become guiding principles" (Thompson, van den Berg, Roehrig, Guarda, & Heinberg, 2004, p. 294). In a review article, Thompson and Stice (2001) described internalization as "the extent to which an individual cognitively 'buys into' socially defined ideals of attractiveness and engages in behaviors designed to produce an approximation of these ideals" (p. 181). In sum, this measure of internalization purports to assess the degree to which, after becoming aware of a societal beauty ideal, women accept it as their own.

Much work has been targeted at further establishing and articulating the role of internalization in the development and/or maintenance of appearance-related dissatisfaction and eating disordered behavior. For example, Keery, van den Berg, and Thompson (2004) found that among early adolescent girls, internalization appears to mediate (at least partially) the association between media exposure

and body dissatisfaction. This finding is consistent with a number of studies with female college student participants (e.g., Cusumano & Thompson, 1997; Fingeret & Gleaves, 2004; Graff Low et al., 2003; Heinberg & Thompson, 1995; Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw, & Stein, 1994; Stice & Shaw, 1994). Thompson and Stice (2001), in addition to noting the role of internalization as a mediator in this relationship, reviewed evidence that internalization can prospectively predict body image disturbance, dieting, and negative affect. Recent research has also begun to evaluate prevention and intervention campaigns designed to reduce internalization of media ideals, some of which have been successful in effecting short-term reductions in internalization (e.g., Irving, DuPen, & Berel, 1998; Neumark-Sztainer, Sherwood, Collier, & Hannan, 2000). However, in a recent review of such programs, Levine and Harrison (2004) noted that outcomes have been mixed, especially with regard to the ability to effect any long-term changes in internalization and other appearance-related variables.

Although there is ample evidence that many women are striving to meet a beauty ideal presented in the media, there is also evidence that women often recognize this ideal for what it is—unrealistic and largely unattainable for most women. Many women are able to critique these images and the beauty standards they present while still feeling bound by these standards (e.g., Engeln-Maddox, 2005; Milkie, 1999). However, the questions on the internalization scale of the SATAQ do not ask respondents to indicate the extent to which they think a media ideal is realistic, healthy, or even appropriate. Instead, the questions ask women whether they want to look like different examples of a media ideal and whether they compare themselves to these examples. It is possible that women scoring high on internalization have not bought into a beauty standard in the sense that they truly believe the media images represent their own idea of what is beautiful or ideal. Rather, women may have internalized this standard because they have come to believe that if they could attain the standard, their lives would change in other important ways. Indeed, some recent research has suggested that this is the case.

Hohlstein, Smith, and Atlas (1998) applied expectancy value theory to women's eating-related behavior and found that women's beliefs that thinness would result in generalized self-improvement were associated with eating disordered behaviors. These authors created the Thinness and Restricting Expectancy Inventory (TREI), which assesses the extent to which women believe that being thin and restricting their eating will result in outcomes such as increased self-esteem, confidence, self-reliance, coping ability, and respect. Evans (2003) exposed women to a picture of a thin target and a written description indicating that the target had either a happy and successful life or an unhappy and unsuccessful life. Participants were told that the description of the woman's life was typical of thin women. Results indicated that women who read the positive life description were less optimistic about their own futures and

demonstrated lower appearance-related self-esteem compared to women who read the negative life description. Thus, it appears that the seemingly irrational pursuit of a largely unattainable ideal may be driven by the association of this beauty ideal with rewarding outcomes—an association the media regularly enforces through pairing images of beautiful women with a variety of social and economic rewards.

The current study seeks to examine the rewards women associate with looking like a media ideal and whether these associations are predictive of appearance-related dissatisfaction. Women were asked to consider how their lives would change if they looked like a media ideal and how likely and positive they viewed these changes to be. It was hypothesized that the tendency to believe that one's life would be likely to change in positive ways if one looked like a media ideal would be associated with internalization. It was also predicted that internalization would mediate the relationship between positive and likely expectations and appearance-related dissatisfaction. Additional qualitative analyses were undertaken to further explore these questions.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 109 undergraduate women recruited from a private, Midwestern university's psychology department participant pool. Students participated in exchange for course credit. The mean age of participants was 18.28 years ($SD = 1.18$ years). Sixty percent of participants identified themselves as White or Caucasian, 15% as Latina/Hispanic, 9% as East Asian, 8% as biracial, 5% as African American, and 3% as other.

Procedure

Participants were first asked to think about what this culture's ideal woman looks like according to the media. They were given space to write a description of the appearance of this woman. After writing this description, participants read the following instructions,

Now please take a moment to imagine that *you look just like* the woman you just described. Think about the ways in which you believe your life would be different if you looked like this woman. How would things change for you? Really take some time to think about this. On the following pages you will see 8 blank boxes. Please explain all of the ways you think your life would change if you looked like this woman by writing each way you think your life would change in a separate box.

Participants were asked to rate the life change they wrote in each box in terms of how likely they believed that change would be if they looked like the media ideal they described

on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all likely*) to 7 (*extremely likely*). They were asked to rate how positive this change would be on a scale ranging from 1 (*an extremely negative change*) to 7 (*an extremely positive change*). As with the SATAQ (described below), participants were not given a specific target to reference when responding to these questions. Instead, they were free to imagine a version of the cultural beauty ideal—quite possibly one that combines attributes from a number of models, actresses, or celebrities.

Participants also completed several self-report questionnaires (detailed below). Half of the participants were randomly assigned to complete the questionnaires after the questions about life changes; the other half completed the questionnaires prior to these questions.

Measures

Rewards variable. For each of the eight expectations listed in response to the above instructions, the product of the likelihood rating and the positivity rating was computed. Each of these products was treated as a scale item, resulting in a Cronbach's alpha of .86 for this measure. The mean of these items indicated the degree to which participants associated positive/likely expectations with looking like a media ideal. For the remainder of this article, this variable is referred to as the rewards variable.

SATAQ. As previously mentioned, the SATAQ (Heinberg et al., 1995) assesses the internalization and awareness of the cultural beauty ideal as represented by mainstream Western media. Although the entire scale was administered, only the internalization subscale (eight items) was of interest for this study. Sample items from this subscale include "I wish I looked like a swimsuit model" and "Women who appear in TV shows and movies project the type of appearance that I see as my goal." Response options ranged from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 5 (*completely agree*). The total score is the sum of the responses to the eight items after reverse scoring the appropriate items. Scores on this subscale are positively correlated with eating disordered behaviors and body image disturbance (Graff Low et al., 2003; Heinberg et al., 1995; Thompson & Stice, 2001) and have been found to prospectively predict the onset of eating disorder symptoms (Stice, 2001; Stice & Agras, 1998). Heinberg et al. (1995) reported an internal consistency of .88 for this subscale. In this study, Cronbach's alpha was .92.

Eating Disorder Inventory-2, Body Dissatisfaction subscale (EDI-BD). The 9-item Body Dissatisfaction subscale of the EDI-2 (Garner, 1991) measured participants' dissatisfaction with the overall shape and size of specific regions of the body. Participants were asked to indicate how often they felt satisfied/unsatisfied with various body areas (e.g., "I think that my stomach is too big.") on a scale ranging from 1 (*always*) to 6 (*never*). After reverse scoring the appropriate items, participants were assigned one point for each

item to which they responded always, usually, or often, with higher scores indicating greater dissatisfaction. Scores on the body dissatisfaction subscale have correlated with eating disorder symptoms (Spillane, Boerner, Anderson, & Smith, 2004), successfully discriminated anorexic and obese patients from comparison group participants, and correlated positively with weight and previously established measures of body dissatisfaction (Garner, Olmstead, & Polivy, 1983). On this subscale, reported reliability coefficients for college women have ranged from .83 to .93 (Garner et al., 1983). Cronbach's alpha was .90 in this sample.

Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire–Appearance Scales (MBSRQ-AS). This is a frequently cited measure of the affective, cognitive, and behavioral components of body image (Cash, 2000). Although the measure comprises five subscales, the subscale of interest for this study was the 7-item Appearance Evaluation subscale, which assesses overall satisfaction with one's appearance (not body specific) on a scale ranging from 1 (*definitely disagree*) to 5 (*definitely agree*). Questions on this subscale include items such as "I like my looks just the way they are" and "Most people would consider me good-looking." The total score for this scale is the mean of responses to these seven items (after reverse scoring appropriate items). High scorers are classified as feeling mostly positive and satisfied with regard to their appearance. This widely used measure has been nationally standardized (Brown, Cash, & Mikulka, 1990; Cash, Winstead, & Janda, 1985, 1986). The Appearance Evaluation subscale is well-validated, with scores on this measure correlating positively with measures of "feeling fat" (Roth & Armstrong, 1993), depression (Denniston, Roth, & Gilroy, 1992), other established measures of body satisfaction (Cash, 2000; Denniston et al., 1992; Engeln-Maddox, 2005), weight loss among obese participants (Dixon, Dixon, & O'Brien, 2002), and increased physical fitness among college students (Williams & Cash, 2001). Previous researchers have reported a Cronbach's alpha for this subscale of .88 with a 1-month test-retest reliability of .91 (Cash, 2000). In this study, Cronbach's alpha was .89.

Body Mass Index (BMI). Participants' self-stated height and weight (collected via a demographics questionnaire) were used to calculate body mass index. The formula for these calculations is detailed on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Web site (www.cdc.gov).

RESULTS

Data from four participants were removed due to the participants' failure to follow instructions (they wrote about an ideal woman in terms of personality characteristics or career instead of appearance). The remaining participants' descriptions of a media ideal all contained references to thinness or body shape, although they varied in terms of

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Rewards Variable, Internalization, Body Dissatisfaction, and Appearance Evaluation

Measure	M	SD
Internalization of the thin ideal (SATAQ-I) ^a	27.80	7.91
Body dissatisfaction (EDI-2) ^b	10.20	7.81
Appearance evaluation (MBSRQ-AS) ^c	3.17	.82
Rewards Variable ^d	25.99	9.88

Note. ^apossible scores range from 8 (low internalization) to 40 (high internalization); ^bpossible scores range from 0 (low levels of dissatisfaction) to 27 (high levels of dissatisfaction); ^cpossible scores range from 1 (low satisfaction with appearance) to 5 (high satisfaction with appearance); ^dpossible scores range from 1 to 49 (see text for interpretation of scores on this variable).

other attributes such as hair or eye color. Table 1 contains means and standard deviations for the internalization scale of the SATAQ, the body dissatisfaction subscale of the EDI-2, the appearance evaluation subscale of the MBSRQ, and the rewards variable. Table 2 contains the correlation coefficients for these variables. The rewards variable, body dissatisfaction, and internalization were all significantly and positively correlated. Appearance evaluation was significantly and negatively correlated with these variables. Multivariate analysis of variance revealed that the scores on these measures did not differ significantly as a function of whether the expectation-listing portion of the study was completed first or last.

Coding categories for the expectations listed by participants were developed using a combination of a priori and emergent coding. First, literature on attractiveness-based biases was reviewed (e.g., Cash, 1990; Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991), and a group of undergraduate research assistants created lists of probable categories of responses based both on this literature and their own responses to the questions that formed the basis of the rewards variable. These lists were combined into one coding system, which was tested with pilot data from 20 undergraduate female participants. Coding this pilot data resulted in the refinement of the descriptions of the original coding

Table 2
Correlation Matrix for Rewards Variable, Body Dissatisfaction, Internalization, and Appearance Evaluation

Measure	1	2	3	4
1. Rewards variable	—	.35**	.49**	-.25*
2. Body dissatisfaction (EDI-2)		—	.52**	-.77**
3. Internalization of the thin ideal (SATAQ)			—	-.40**
4. Appearance evaluation				—

* $p < .05$ (2-tailed). ** $p < .01$ (2-tailed).

Table 3
Sample Responses for the Expectation Categories

<i>Expectation Category</i>	<i>Sample Thoughts</i>
1. Positive psychological impact	"I would have more confidence." "I wouldn't be so self-conscious or insecure about my physique." "I could focus more on my inner abilities and talent." "I would be happier emotionally."
2. Positive social attention (nonromantic)	"People would enjoy being around me." "I would have more friends because people want to be friends with pretty people." "Social situations would be easier." "I would have more of a social life."
3. Romantic success with opposite sex	"Obviously, more boys would find me attractive, then maybe I would have a boyfriend." "Males would be more attracted to me." "I would get to date the most attractive guys." "Find a nice, and good-looking potential husband."
4. Employment/economic success	"Better chance at a higher-ranking job." "I would have an easier time getting a job." "I'd have an advantage if I chose a career in a competitive field." "No money problems, since they [people who look like the ideal] are always rich."
5. Apparel	"I could wear clothing I've only dreamed of wearing." "I could shop at any store I wanted so my clothes would be more fashionable." "Ease in shopping and picking out clothes." "I would be able to find clothes that look great on me."
6. Less pressure about appearance from others	"My mom wouldn't nag me for eating when I'm not supposed to." "Less criticism from friends/family on how I look." "Laughing or comments about my weight would disappear."
7. Negative social consequences	"My relationship with girls would be very tense." "Women who don't know you would not like you because of the way you look." "I would be stereotyped as dumb and uneducated." "I'd probably be perceived as the typical dumb blond."
8. Negative personality consequences	"I would have to watch my weight all the time and worry about appearance a lot." "I would probably care less about school." "Material things would become more important." "I would be conceited."

categories and the addition of emergent categories. This coding system was then tested on a second set of pilot data from an additional 20 participants. Disagreements between coders at this stage were used to further clarify the descriptions of the final eight coding categories described below.

Each expectation listed by participants in this study was coded by two research assistants, who demonstrated adequate inter-rater reliability with a kappa of .84. Disagreements with regard to coding category were resolved through discussion. Sample responses falling into each of the eight coding categories are contained in Table 3. Eight percent of responses were uninterpretable (e.g., "would be good," "things would change"), and thus were not placed into one of the eight categories. However, the likelihood and positivity

ratings associated with these uncoded responses were still included in the creation of the rewards variable, despite our inability to interpret them.

Types of Expectations Associated With a Media Ideal

Table 4 provides two indicators of the frequency with which each category of expectation was generated. First, for each category, the percent of participants listing at least one expectation in that category is listed. Additionally, for each category, an indication of the proportion of coded expectations falling into the category relative to the total number of coded expectations is provided. This table also lists the mean likelihood and positivity ratings for each type of expectation associated with looking like a media ideal. Six

Table 4
Percentages, Mean Likelihood Ratings, and Positivity Ratings of Expectation Categories

<i>Expectation Category</i>	<i>Percent Listing at Least One Response in This Category</i>	<i>Percent of Total Coded Responses</i>	<i>Positivity Rating M (SD)</i>	<i>Likelihood Rating M (SD)</i>
1. Positive psychological impact	24	25	5.96 (1.11)	5.58 (1.30)
2. Positive social attention (nonromantic)	72	18	5.23 (1.41)	4.98 (1.31)
3. Romantic success	65	12	5.00 (1.52)	5.62 (1.27)
4. Employment/economic success	54	11	5.21 (1.60)	4.95 (1.35)
5. Apparel	46	8	5.45 (1.52)	5.55 (1.37)
6. Less pressure about appearance from others	20	3	5.50 (1.47)	5.00 (1.77)
7. Negative social consequences	36	8	1.95 (1.43)	5.23 (1.30)
8. Negative personality consequences	24	7	2.34 (1.68)	4.84 (1.36)

of the eight expectations were positively rated; two were negatively rated. Mean likelihood ratings for each of the expectations ranged from 4.8 to 5.6 (on a 7-point scale). Positively rated expectations are first discussed, followed by negatively rated expectations.

Participants related a wide array of psychological benefits associated with looking like a media ideal, including increased confidence, assertiveness, self-esteem, and happiness, as well as decreased body hatred. As one participant put it, "I would not think of my weight as a factor in everything I do." Another wrote, "I would be happier and more content with my life." Social rewards (nonromantic and romantic) were also listed, as were practical benefits (greater employment/economic opportunities and more successful/enjoyable shopping for apparel) and a reduction in appearance-related pressure from friends and relatives. For example, one participant wrote, "My family situation would improve because my parents would stop criticizing my appearance." Participants also identified two different types of negative outcomes, including negative social consequences (e.g., same-sex relationships rife with jealousy and resentment; being judged as less intelligent, more materialistic, and less friendly) and negative personality-based changes (e.g., becoming more shallow, materialistic, and appearance focused).

Tests of Mediation

The primary hypothesis for this study predicted that the rewards variable would be significantly associated with appearance-related dissatisfaction and that this relationship would be mediated by internalization. Two variables were included as measures of appearance-related dissatisfaction: the body dissatisfaction subscale of the EDI-2 and the appearance evaluation subscale of the MBSRQ-AS. These two measures are scored in opposite directions, with higher scores on the appearance evaluation scale indicating greater satisfaction with one's appearance and higher scores on the body dissatisfaction scale indicating greater dissatisfaction. To test this model, Preacher and Leonardelli's (2001) recommended methodology for testing mediation effects using regression was employed. In all analyses reported below, BMI was first entered. Thus, the variance explained by the tested variables is over and above that accounted for by BMI.

All bivariate relationships were first examined. Regressing body dissatisfaction on the rewards variable resulted in a significant effect ($\beta = .31, p < .001$), as did regressing internalization on the rewards variable ($\beta = .48, p < .001$), and regressing body dissatisfaction on internalization ($\beta = .46, p < .001$). The effect of regressing body dissatisfaction on the rewards variable became nonsignificant ($\beta = .12, ns$) after accounting for internalization. A Sobel's test confirmed a reliable reduction ($z = 3.58, p < .001$). This procedure was repeated using appearance evaluation in place of body dissatisfaction, and the same pattern emerged. Regressing

appearance evaluation on the rewards variable resulted in a significant effect ($\beta = -.20, p < .05$), which became nonsignificant ($\beta = -.06, ns$) after accounting for the effect of internalization. Again, the direct path between the rewards variable and internalization was significant ($\beta = .48, p < .001$), as was the direct path between appearance evaluation and internalization ($\beta = -.33, p < .001$). This reduction was reliable as indicated by a Sobel's test ($z = -2.70, p < .01$).

DISCUSSION

As indicated by the analysis of written responses in this study, it is clear that women associated a wide variety of rewards with looking like a media ideal. Instead of examining these beliefs in the abstract (e.g., in terms of stereotypes associated with attractiveness), this study asked women to consider how their lives would change if they met their version of the female beauty standard promoted by the media. Results indicated that they believed their lives would change in important, positive ways. Although participants did identify some of the ways their lives might change for the worse if their appearance were consistent with a media-represented ideal, in general, the expectations they associated with looking like a media ideal were viewed as overwhelmingly positive and quite likely. Many of these positive expectations are consistent with research on physical attractiveness stereotypes (e.g., Eagly et al., 1991), including participants' frequently listed beliefs that they would be more socially competent, successful, and well-adjusted if they looked like a media ideal. Likewise, one of the negative expectations associated with looking like a media ideal centered on women's concerns that they would become more superficial and appearance-focused, which is consistent with the stereotype associating beauty with self-centeredness (e.g., Cash & Janda, 1984).

Were participants accurate in terms of their predictions of how their lives would change if their appearance changed? Research has indicated that to some extent, the positive stereotypes associated with attractiveness may reflect social realities. Furthermore, these stereotypes are often consistent with literature examining differences in personality characteristics between attractive and unattractive individuals (e.g., Cash, 1990; Feingold, 1992). Thus, in terms of content, the rewards and punishments women associated with this level of physical attractiveness are not necessarily unrealistic. However, participants may have overestimated the likelihood that their expectations would be fulfilled given ideal beauty. For example, these participants believed it to be highly likely that they would be happier if they looked like a media ideal. However, empirical research has revealed that the strength of the association between physical attractiveness and happiness/life satisfaction is unimpressive (Diener, Wolsic, & Fujita, 1995). Likewise, the previously cited meta-analysis on attractiveness stereotypes found only small to moderate effects in terms of

impression formation, whereas the participants in this study predicted large, consistent effects.

As predicted, the results indicated a significant association between the expectations women associated with looking like a media ideal and satisfaction with appearance. However, these expectations had no effect on appearance-related satisfaction beyond that which was accounted for by internalization. In other words, beliefs that life would change for the better if one looked like a media ideal are related to dissatisfaction with appearance, but only to the extent that such beliefs foster acceptance of media ideals. Linking positive expectations with a media ideal and believing these expectations to be highly likely appears to be a significant predictor of the extent to which a woman internalizes the ideal. This finding casts doubt on the notion that women value the cultural beauty ideal only for its own sake. Rather, the evidence presented in this study suggests that many women may seek to emulate their ideal because they seek the social, psychological, and practical rewards associated with this ideal. These reward motives may be coincident with a person's true adoption of a media ideal as their own. Alternatively, these reward motives may usurp true acceptance of these ideals. Thus, although some have commented on the seemingly paradoxical finding that women can criticize a highly unattainable beauty ideal yet still seek to emulate it (e.g., Hirschman & Thompson, 1997; Milkie, 1999), these results suggest that this finding is not so paradoxical after all. Perhaps women are capable of maintaining their own individually formed ideas of beauty, while still recognizing that achieving the standards espoused by the media could change their lives in positive ways.

This research has clear implications for media literacy-based prevention and intervention programs. These programs encourage women to be more critical of media images—questioning how realistic and representative they are (e.g., Irving & Berel, 2001; Irving et al., 1998; Posavac, Posavac, & Weigel, 2001). The assumption is that this process will disrupt the social comparison process that has been implicated as a key mediator in the relationship between exposure to idealized images and body image disturbance (Levine & Harrison, 2004; Shaw & Waller, 1995). Yet, as previously mentioned, these programs have met with limited success, perhaps because many girls and women are already quite adept at questioning these images (Engeln-Maddox, 2005). A more fruitful intervention strategy might involve challenging the assumption that those who look most like a media ideal are happier and lead easier, more successful lives. For example, women could be presented with compelling life stories about real women who do not look like a media ideal, yet are successful and happy. Another approach might include psychoeducational programs emphasizing predictors of life satisfaction and happiness identified by empirical research such as meaningful close relationships, engaging and challenging work/hobbies, and a sense of purpose (Myers & Diener, 1995). Indeed, recent

work by Evans (2003) hints that this strategy might be effective.

This study is not without its limitations. Although college women constitute a population of interest due to their elevated rates of body image disturbance (Pyle, Neuman, Halvorson, & Mitchell, 1990), some research has suggested that the variables examined in this study may vary in important ways among different age groups of women (e.g., McKinley, 1999). It is possible that age-related variation in internalization and appearance-related dissatisfaction may be a result of changes in the types of expectations women associate with a media ideal as they age. Furthermore, although this sample was somewhat diverse in terms of ethnicity, it lacked an adequate number of women in some ethnic groups to conduct separate analyses for each group. Given evidence of racial differences in body satisfaction (e.g., Cash & Henry, 1995), future work in this area should examine whether women belonging to different racial and ethnic groups express different types of rewards/punishments associated with looking like a media ideal, and whether these differences might predict racial/ethnic differences in appearance-related satisfaction.

An additional limitation of this research is that the methodology does not allow for causal conclusions to be drawn with regard to the relationships between internalization, appearance-related dissatisfaction, and expectations associated with looking like a media ideal. Future studies could explore the flexibility of women's expectations and whether targeting these beliefs might be an effective route to reducing appearance-related dissatisfaction. Despite these limitations, this study sheds light on the nature of internalization of cultural beauty ideals and points toward a new method of challenging this internalization, perhaps opening new routes in the quest to free women from the often deleterious effects of exposure to media-constructed female beauty ideals.

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