Appearance-Related Teasing and Substance Use During Early Adolescence

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Background

◆ Appearance-Related Teasing is defined as any type of negative feedback related to one’s appearance (e.g., insults, cruel comments, sexist remarks, poking-fun; Cash, 2012). This is a common experience among adolescents (Haines, et al., 2013).
◆ Substance use often emerges in adolescence (Johnston, et al., 2010) and is associated with a host of adverse psychosocial outcomes. Affective regulation models suggest that people use alcohol and drugs to avoid or reduce negative emotional states (Sher & Slutske, 2003).
◆ Body image becomes increasingly important to the self-worth during adolescence (Ricciardelli & Yager, 2016), making appearance-related teasing a noteworthy stressor for adolescents who may then turn to substance use as an “escape” from negative emotions and stress.
◆ Body image ideals are especially stringent for girls (Blowers et al., 2003), potentially making appearance-related teasing more stressful for girls. Therefore, it is conceivable that girls may be more likely than boys to use substances as an “escape.”
◆ To date, research has not examined appearance-related teasing and substance use together.

Objective

Primary Objective: To examine the relationship between appearance-related teasing and substance use in a large, diverse community sample of early adolescents.
Secondary Objective: To examine whether gender moderates these relationships between appearance-related teasing and substance use.

Methods

Participants
◆ 1,056 7th and 8th grade students recruited from five middle schools in the New England region of the United States
◆ 52% Girls
◆ 55% Non-Hispanic White, 16% Hispanic, 8% Black or African American, 3% Asian, 14% Multi-Racial/ethnic, and 4% other race/ethnicity
◆ Age: M = 13 years, SD = 0.65, Range = 11-15 years

Procedures
◆ Adolescents completed surveys at school in the Fall of 2016
◆ Movie passes were given to adolescents upon completion

Measures
◆ The Weight-Related Teasing Questionnaire (Levine, Smolak, & Hayden, 1994)
◆ Assessed the degree to which adolescents have experienced appearance-related teasing or negative comments about body weight or shape from family members and peers in the past 6 months (α = .75)
◆ Substance Use Survey (Ohannessian, 2009)
◆ Total alcohol consumption (quantity x frequency)
◆ Binge drinking frequency in the past 6 months
◆ Marijuana use frequency in the past 6 months

Covariates
◆ The MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (SSS; Goodman et al., 2001)
◆ Self-reported height and weight used to calculate BMI
◆ Logarithm transformed to achieve a normal distribution.

Analytic Plan
◆ Hierarchical linear regression models
◆ Independent variable: appearance-related teasing total score
◆ Dependent variables: substance use variables
◆ Moderator: gender (coded as 1 = girls and 0 = boys)
◆ Covariates: age, race/ethnicity, perceived socioeconomic status, and BMI

Results

Table 1. Main Effects of Appearance-Related Teasing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>95% CI (B)</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>ΔR²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Alcohol Consumption</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.19 – 0.26</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>.015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Binge Drinking</td>
<td>0.38*</td>
<td>0.04 – 0.71</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>.055</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marijuana Use</td>
<td>0.41***</td>
<td>0.21 – 0.62</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>.026</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

◆ Results suggest that adolescents reporting higher levels of appearance-related teasing engaged in significantly more frequent binge drinking and marijuana use.
◆ There was no significant relationship between appearance-related teasing and total alcohol consumption.

Conclusion

◆ Overall, the hypothesis that the importance of body image makes appearance-related teasing stressful, and likely to be associated with substance use in early adolescence, was partially supported.
◆ Consistent with sociocultural (Blowers et al., 2003) and escape theories (Sher & Slutske, 2003), girls may experience higher degrees of stress in response to appearance-related teasing than boys, thus engaging in more drinking behavior. The hypothesis was not supported for marijuana use.

Implications
◆ Results highlight the need to address appearance-related teasing in the school and family context, especially for girls.
◆ Future studies should assess the underlying mechanisms that account for these patterns longitudinally.

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