Body dissatisfaction is one facet of body image that is associated with an individual’s degree of dissatisfaction with overall appearance or with specific physical characteristics (e.g., body weight or shape) (Thompson, 2002). Body dissatisfaction comprises both state and trait aspects (Cash et al., 2002).

- Trait body satisfaction is thought to be a stable characteristic that is transmissible across varying contexts and is associated with personality factors (e.g., perfectionism, self-esteem, etc.), appearance-related factors (e.g., body shame/surveillance, internalisation of the thin ideal), and social-cultural influences.

- State body satisfaction is considered to fluctuate on a moment-by-moment basis with these fluctuations being linked to contextual (e.g., social situations, exercise and body-exposing situations) and affective factors (negative mood) that too vary over time (Latham & Hutchinson, 2010).

Body dissatisfaction has been linked to weight management behaviours in women and adolescent girls (Cash & Thompson, 1994). Surprisingly, body dissatisfaction is also related to binge eating (Dunkley & Gillo, 2007). The act of binging occurs amid a general effort to restrict eating and obtain a more attractive appearance by achieving a slim figure. This represents a self-defeating pattern of behaviour as it undermines the individual’s intentions to lose weight.

Despite the wealth of cross-sectional evidence supporting the relationship between body dissatisfaction and binge eating, laboratory-based studies have rarely found that elicitation of body dissatisfaction promotes binge eating. In our study, we argue that the unrealistic factors (e.g., perfectionism, self-esteem, etc.), appearance-related factors (e.g., food (Beebe, 1994; Shepherd & Herman, 1991), and may also have the unintended consequences of initiating periods of binge eating to restore energy levels after a period of deprivation (Polivy & Herman, 1985, 1987).

Aims and Hypothesis

The relationship between body dissatisfaction and binge eating has most frequently been assessed using trait measurements, cross-sectional designs or a limited number of time intervals. However, given that this approach is not entirely sensitive to the state-dependence of body satisfaction ratings, the results of these studies are likely to confine state- and trait-based components of body satisfaction (Melnik et al., 2004).

Despite the wealth of cross-sectional evidence supporting the mediating influences of dietary restraint and negative mood on the relationship between body dissatisfaction and binge eating, laboratory-based studies have rarely found that elicitation of body dissatisfaction significantly mediates the relationship between body dissatisfaction and binge eating. Negative affect failed to significantly explain this link. This pattern of findings replicated when the outcome variable was related to include comfort eating (eating to feel better) that failed to qualify as a binge.

Multi-level mediation modeling revealed that dietary restraint significantly mediates the relationship between body dissatisfaction and binge eating. Negative affect failed to significantly explain this link. This pattern of findings replicated when the outcome variable was related to include comfort eating (eating to feel better) that failed to qualify as a binge.

Reactivity was tested and the current study found no evidence of this effect. Completion rates were also correlated against trait variables and none of those relationships were significant. Thus, the generalisability of the study’s results does not seem to be compromised by participants completing less than all possible assessments. Furthermore, the reactivity analyses suggest that the burden of repeated assessment did not undermine data quality over the week.

Discussion

These results show the utility of experience sampling approaches for evaluating dynamic relationships between state-like variables, as they occur in individuals natural environments.

This approach allows researchers to identify potential triggers in the environment that may promote negative feelings about one’s appearance which may in turn lead to unhealthy eating practices, such as binge eating.

Additionally, this approach may further develop theoretical understanding of how transient body image disturbances manifest and the implications of these disturbances for problematic eating behaviours.

Present findings provide evidence to suggest that dietary restraint mediates the relationship between body dissatisfaction and binge eating. It was also shown that this relationship holds for the outcome was modified to include comfort eating (eating to feel better).

Results

Method

An experience sampling methodology was utilised to capture the relations between body dissatisfaction, mood and eating behaviours in real-time. By re-sampling across several time points, it was expected that estimates would better reflect daily experiences than simple induction designs.

108 women aged 18 to 40 years completed an online survey (accessed via a mobile phone device with access to the internet) for a 7-day period. The mobile phone device prompted participants at random intervals seven times daily to self-report their state body dissatisfaction, current mood experiences, and eating practices since last assessment.

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