

Envy Mediates the link Between Women's Appearance Comparison and Mate Retention

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Introduction

- Previous research has highlighted the respective roles of social cognition and emotion in organizing behavioral outputs to mating challenges.
- Relative to males, female mate value is disproportionately determined by their physical appearance (Buss, 1988).
- Arnocky et al (2012) showed that females who made more upward physical appearance comparisons (UPAC) (i.e., perceived other women as being more attractive than themselves) were more jealous in their romantic relationships. Jealousy then mediated links between UPAC and relational aggression toward other women and the partner.
- Recent research has identified the emotion of envy, or discontent over others' qualities, as an important mediator between female appearance comparisons and competitive appearance enhancement behavior.
- However, to date, it is unclear whether (1) female upward appearance comparison predicts either cost-inflicting or benefit-provisioning mate-retention, or (2) behavior envy mediates links between female upward physical appearance comparisons and mate-retention efforts.
- The present research explored these effects in a sample of undergraduate females.

Method

Sample. 126 undergraduate women aged 17 to 40 (M = 20, SD = 3.62).

Demographic Measures. Prior to the priming task, participants completed measures of age and romantic relationship status ("Are you currently in a committed heterosexual romantic relationship?").

Upward Physical Appearance Comparison (UPACS). The UPACS (O'Brien et al., 2009) assessed respondent's tendency to engage in upward (10 items) appearance comparisons. Items to assess upward appearance comparisons include "When I see a people with a great body, I tend to wonder how I 'match-up' with them." Respondents indicate their level of agreement with each item using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher averaged scores on the UPACS indicate higher levels of upward comparisons.

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Method (Continued)

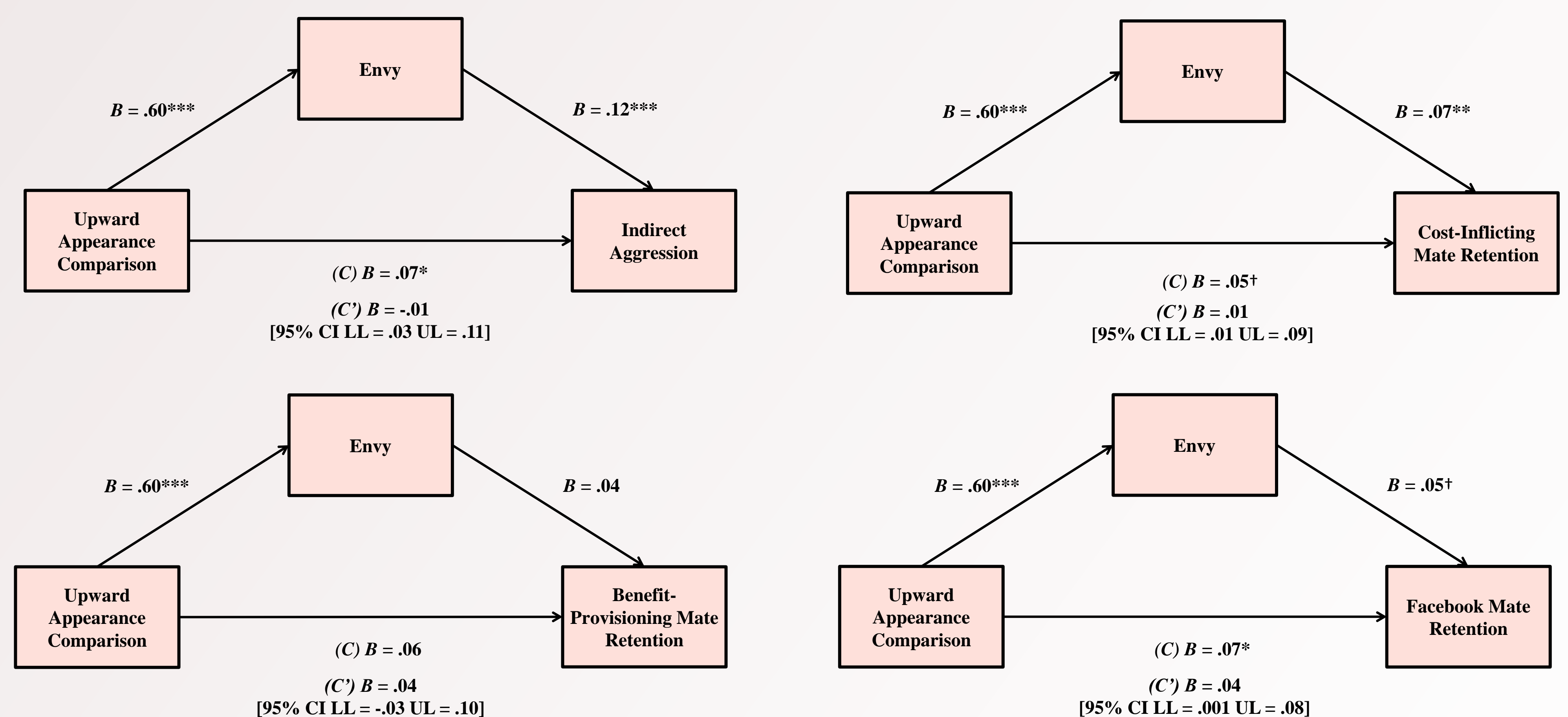
Envy. We used the Dispositional Envy Scale (DES) to measure individual differences in the tendency to envy others (Smith, Parrott, Diener, Hoyle, & Kim, 1999). The DES consists of 8 items rated with a 9-point Likert-type scale ranging from -4 = "very strong disagreement" to +4 = "very strong agreement". Example items are as follows: "I feel envy every day," "It is so frustrating to see some people succeed so easily," and "I am troubled by feelings of inadequacy." Participants' responses to the items were averaged to create a dispositional envy score, $\alpha = .93$.

Mate Retention. The Mate Retention Inventory-Short Form (MRI-SF; Buss, Shackelford, & McKibbin, 2008) contains 38 items along which respondents indicate how often they have performed the target behavior in the past year (0 = "Never" to 3 = "Often"). Items load onto two higher-order factors: benefit-provisioning behavior ($\alpha = .91$) such as "Bought my partner an expensive gift", and cost-inflicting behavior ($\alpha = .78$) such as "Insisted that my partner spend all their free time with me".

Facebook Mate Retention. Responses to items (e.g., "Asked my partner to make our relationship status visible on Facebook") (Brem et al., 2014) were reported on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (often) to indicate how often participants use various mate-retention tactics on Facebook ($\alpha = .90$).

Results

Figure 1. Females † = $p < .10$, * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, *** = $p < .001$ (2-tailed)



Conclusion

Females who made more frequent upward physical appearance comparisons were more likely to engage in indirect aggression toward other women, and engaged in more cost-inflicting and Facebook-based mate retention (but not benefit-provisioning) behavior. In each of these cases, envy fully mediated the link between comparison and competitive mating behavior. These findings support a model whereby a cognitive appraisal of where one stands upon an important mate-value dimension prompts an adaptive emotion which may serve to motivate compensatory behavior aimed at harming intrasexual rivals and retaining valued mates.

References

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