

Path analysis exploring extensions of the Identity Disruption Model of body dissatisfaction: Incorporating peer bullying and emotion regulation

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ABSTRACT

The Identity Disruption Model of body dissatisfaction suggests that childhood family adversity is associated with body dissatisfaction via lower self-concept clarity and increased appearance processes (internalization of appearance ideals and appearance comparisons). This study explored possible extensions of the Identity Disruption Model by examining whether peer bullying is another form of childhood adversity associated with lower self-concept clarity, and whether difficulties in emotion regulation could be another pathway through which childhood adversity is associated with weight/shape dissatisfaction. Participants (316 women) completed self-report measures of the relevant constructs. Path analysis showed that family adversity (but not peer bullying) was associated with lower self-concept clarity; lower self-concept clarity was associated with greater internalization and more frequent appearance comparisons; and greater internalization and more frequent appearance comparisons were associated with greater weight/shape dissatisfaction. Family adversity and peer bullying were both associated with greater difficulties in emotion regulation, which were in turn associated with greater weight/shape dissatisfaction. Self-concept clarity and emotion dysregulation may be separate mechanisms through which early adversity is associated with weight/shape dissatisfaction, but future research should explore the potential for more nuanced associations among early adversity, self-concept clarity/emotion dysregulation, and other constructs represented in the Identity Disruption Model.

1. Introduction

Sociocultural models of body dissatisfaction have outlined the important role of appearance processes, such as internalization of cultural appearance ideals and appearance-based comparisons, in the development and maintenance of body-image concerns (e.g., Thompson et al., 1999). Building on that framework, researchers have begun to investigate individual risk factors that can increase susceptibility to those sociocultural appearance processes. For example, the Identity Disruption Model (Vartanian & Hayward, 2018; Vartanian et al., 2018) posits that negative early life experiences disrupt the development of an individual's sense of self, and that this disrupted sense of self in turn increases vulnerability to sociocultural appearance processes. This increased vulnerability is thought to arise because individuals who lack a clear sense of their own personal identity tend to rely on external sources of self-definition (Campbell, 1990) and are more likely to compare themselves to others to determine where they fit into society (Butzer & Kuiper, 2006).

The Identity Disruption Model provides a promising framework for

understanding vulnerability to body dissatisfaction, and there is accumulating evidence in support of this model. Several studies have shown that reported experiences of early family adversity (e.g., abuse, neglect, or growing up in a chaotic and unstable family environment) are associated with a less clearly-defined sense of self (e.g., Hayward et al., 2020; Streamer & Seery, 2015; Vartanian et al., 2018; Wong et al., 2019). Furthermore, lower self-concept clarity has been consistently associated with a greater degree of internalization of appearance ideals and with more frequent appearance comparisons across a range of methodologies, including cross-sectional (Vartanian et al., 2023), longitudinal (Vartanian & Nicholls, 2024), experimental (Carter & Vartanian, 2022), and ecological momentary assessment (Vartanian et al., 2025; Tang et al., 2026) studies.

Most of the research on the Identity Disruption Model has focused on early adversity occurring within the family environment, but it is worth considering whether other forms of early adversity are also relevant in this context. One form of early adversity that is both commonly experienced and associated with a range of negative outcomes is peer bullying (Copeland et al., 2013). Peer bullying refers to repeated and

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intentional aggressive behaviors perpetrated by peers against a victim who is unable to defend themselves (Olweus, 1993). Victims of peer bullying often report higher levels of depression and anxiety, peer rejection, poor academic performance, and lower school connectedness (Halliday et al., 2021). Of particular relevance to this paper, peer bullying victimization has been consistently associated with greater body dissatisfaction in cross-sectional and longitudinal studies (Day et al., 2022). Peer bullying has also been shown to impact the development of one's sense of self (Marsh et al., 2004), and one study specifically found that more frequent bullying experiences were associated with lower self-concept clarity (Yang et al., 2024). Therefore, it may be that bullying is another form of early adversity that can increase vulnerability to body dissatisfaction via self-concept clarity (and, subsequently, internalization of appearance ideals and appearance comparisons).

Another way to extend the Identity Disruption Model is to consider other potential mechanisms through which early adversity could be related to sociocultural appearance processes and body dissatisfaction. The Identity Disruption Model centers on the role of self-concept clarity due to its theoretically-derived and empirically-supported relevance, but taking into consideration other potential mechanisms could provide additional explanatory power to the model. Emotion regulation is a candidate mechanism that may be particularly pertinent in this context. Emotion regulation refers to the process through which individuals manage and appropriately respond to their emotional experiences (Gross, 2014), and there is emerging evidence that difficulties in emotion regulation are associated with body dissatisfaction both cross-sectionally (Momeñe et al., 2023) and longitudinally (Messer et al., 2025).

Of relevance to the Identity Disruption Model, exposure to early adversity can disrupt the development of emotion regulation by altering neurobiological systems involved in the stress response, such as the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis, which supports psychological and behavioral responses to threats and challenges (Smith & Pollak, 2020). Indeed, there is empirical support for the relationship between early adversity and emotion regulation, with research showing that early adverse experiences, such as child abuse and neglect, are associated with greater difficulties in emotion regulation (Miu et al., 2022). Furthermore, one study conducted among men in China found that early peer bullying was associated with greater difficulties in emotion regulation, which were in turn associated with greater body dissatisfaction (Wang et al., 2025). These findings suggest that emotion (dys)regulation may represent a pathway through which early adverse experiences can contribute to body dissatisfaction.

There is also some suggestion that emotion regulation might be related to the core mechanism outlined in the Identity Disruption Model (i.e., self-concept clarity), although the nature of this potential relationship is unclear. Theoretical models of borderline personality disorder propose a reciprocal relationship between identity instability and emotion dysregulation (Linehan, 1993), but empirical evidence is scant. One cross-sectional study found that individuals with higher self-concept clarity tend to cope more effectively with negative emotions, and that emotion regulation mediated the relationship between self-concept clarity and psychological adjustment (Parise et al., 2019). However, another cross-sectional study tested the reverse sequence and found that self-concept clarity mediated the link between emotion dysregulation and non-suicidal self-injury (Lear & Pepper, 2016). Overall, then, self-concept clarity and emotion regulation may be related to one another, and both may help explain the connection between early adversity and body dissatisfaction.

1.1. The present study

The aim of the present study was to examine possible extensions to the Identity Disruption Model by incorporating peer bullying as an additional form of early adversity, and by including emotion (dys)

regulation as an additional mechanism that could account for the connection between early adversity and body dissatisfaction. Following from the Identity Disruption Model (Vartanian & Hayward, 2018), we predicted that early adversity (from both family and peers) would be associated with higher body dissatisfaction (operationalized as weight/shape dissatisfaction) via lower self-concept clarity, greater internalization of appearance ideals, and more frequent appearance-based comparisons. Drawing on research on emotion regulation (Wang et al., 2025), we also hypothesized that early adversity would be linked to greater difficulties in emotion regulation, which would subsequently be linked to greater weight/shape dissatisfaction. As a more exploratory aim, we also examined whether self-concept clarity was correlated with difficulties in emotion regulation.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A total of 324 participants signed up for this study. Participants were recruited from a first-year psychology course at a large Australian public university and were compensated with course credit for their participation. The study included only participants who identified as women because women are generally thought to be more susceptible to sociocultural processes and body-image concerns than are men (e.g., Dittmar, 2005), and we also did not want to overly complicate this initial exploration of an extension of the Identity Disruption Model by including gender as a factor. Therefore, five participants who did not identify as women were excluded from the analyses. We had planned on excluding participants who failed three or more of the four attention check questions (i.e., questions directing them to select a specific response), but no participant met that threshold. We did, however, identify three participants who demonstrated careless responding (i.e., they selected the same response for every item on two separate questionnaires, both of which had reverse-coded items), and those participants were excluded from the analyses. Thus, the final sample consisted of 316 participants. Participants had a mean age of 19 years ($SD = 1.7$, range = 18–36), and a mean BMI (kg/m^2) of 22.1 ($SD = 4.4$, range = 15.0–48.1). With regards to ethnicity, 26.9% identified as White, 63.3% identified as Asian, 3.5% identified as Middle Eastern, 1.6% identified as Aboriginal/Pacific Islander, and the remaining participants reported their ethnicity as “other,” selected “prefer not to say,” or did not answer the question. The majority of participants reported that they were born in Australia (60.1%) and that English was their first language (64.2%).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Early family adversity

The Risky Families Questionnaire (RFQ; Taylor et al., 2004) is an 11-item scale that was used to assess participants' experiences of having grown up in a stressful or dysfunctional household (e.g., “How often did a parent or other adult in the household swear at you, insult you, put you down, or act in a way that made you feel threatened?”). Each item was rated on a 5-point scale (0 = *Not at all*, 4 = *Very often*). After reverse-coding relevant items, responses were summed, with higher scores reflecting greater family adversity. This measure has been validated against clinical interviews (Taylor et al., 2004) and has shown good reliability in past research (Vartanian et al., 2023). In the current study, Cronbach's alpha was .86.

2.2.2. Early bullying experiences

A simplified version of the California Bullying Victimization Scale – Retrospective (CBVS-R; Green et al., 2018) was used in the current study to assess experiences with peer bullying prior to the age of 18. The questionnaire included eight forms of bullying: teasing, rumor spreading, social exclusion, hitting, threatening, sexual jokes or gestures, stealing, and online aggression. In the original measure,

participants indicated whether they had experienced each of these different forms of bullying, how frequently these occurred, and reported the perceived power imbalance between the victim and the aggressor. Following previous research and the only other study to directly examine bullying and self-concept clarity (Yang et al., 2024), we assessed only the frequency of bullying experiences. Participants were asked to consider their entire childhood (before the age of 18), and then were asked, “How often have the following things happened to you at school, in a mean or hurtful way?” Each form of bullying was rated on a six-point scale (0 = *Never*, 5 = *Several times a week*). Scores were summed, with higher scores indicating more frequent experiences of bullying. This simplified version of the measure has shown good internal consistency in past research (Yang et al., 2024). In the current study, Cronbach’s alpha was .90.

2.2.3. Self-concept clarity

The Self-Concept Clarity Scale (SCCS; Campbell et al., 1996) is a 12-item scale that was used to measure the degree to which participants’ beliefs about themselves are stable, consistent and clearly defined (e.g., “In general, I have a clear sense of who I am and what I am”). Each item was rated on a 7-point scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*). After reverse-coding relevant items, higher mean scores reflected greater self-concept clarity. This measure has shown good construct and criterion validity in past research (Campbell et al., 1996). In the current study, the Cronbach’s alpha was .90.

2.2.4. Difficulties in emotion regulation

The Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale-Short Form (DERS-SF; Kaufman et al., 2016) is an 18-item scale that was used to measure participants’ difficulties in understanding and managing their emotions (e.g., “When I’m upset, I have difficulty getting work done”). Each item was rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *Almost never*, 5 = *Almost always*). After reverse-coding relevant items, all items were summed, with higher scores reflecting greater difficulties in emotion regulation. This measure has shown excellent reliability and validity in past research (Victor & Klonsky, 2016). The internal consistency was excellent in the current study ($\alpha = .91$).

2.2.5. Internalization of appearance ideals

The Internalization-Thin/Low Body Fat subscale of the Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire (SATAQ-4R; Schaefer et al., 2017) is a 4-item scale that was used to measure the degree to which participants internalized societal ideals of thinness (e.g., “I want my body to look very thin”). Each item was rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *Definitely disagree*, 5 = *Definitely agree*), with a higher mean score indicating greater internalization of societal ideals. This scale has demonstrated good reliability and construct validity in women (Schaefer et al., 2017). In the current study, Cronbach’s alpha was .82.

2.2.6. Appearance comparison

The Physical Appearance Comparison Scale-Revised (PACS-R; Schaefer & Thompson, 2014) is an 11-item scale that was used to measure participants’ tendencies to compare their appearance with that of others (e.g., “When I meet a new person (same sex), I compare my body size to his/her body size.”). Each item was rated on a 5-point scale (0 = *Never*, 4 = *Always*), with a higher mean score indicating a greater tendency to make appearance comparisons. This measure has shown good reliability and validity (Schaefer & Thompson, 2014). The internal consistency in the current study was excellent ($\alpha = .97$).

2.2.7. Weight/shape dissatisfaction

The Weight and Shape Concerns subscales of the Eating Disorder Examination Questionnaire (EDE-Q; Fairburn & Beglin, 1994) were used to assess the extent of body weight and shape dissatisfaction in participants. Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences over the past 28 days (e.g., “How dissatisfied have you been with your weight?”).

Seven items assessed body shape concerns, four items assessed body weight concerns, and one item assessed both body shape and weight concerns. Each item was rated on a 7-point scale (0 = *Not at all/No days*, 6 = *Every day/Markedly*) with higher mean scores indicating greater shape and weight concerns. This measure has demonstrated evidence of reliability and validity in a community sample (Mond et al., 2004). Internal consistency was excellent in this study ($\alpha = .95$).

2.3. Procedure

This study was approved by the university’s ethics committee, and the study method and data analysis plan were preregistered on AsPredicted (<https://aspredicted.org/d355-pjc5.pdf>). The online platform where participants could sign up for the study informed them that the study was about: “early life experiences, including potentially negative experiences such as aggression at home or bullying at school, and questions about your well-being and your thoughts and feelings about yourself and the way you look”. The study was completed entirely online. After providing informed consent, participants completed questionnaires assessing: (1) early family adversity and early peer bullying (in random order), (2) self-concept clarity and emotion regulation (in random order), (3) internalization of appearance ideals and appearance-based comparisons (in random order), and then (4) weight/shape dissatisfaction.

2.4. Statistical analyses

There was negligible missing data in this study, with only two items missing across all questionnaires. Data were screened for normality, and all variables were normally distributed, except for the peer bullying measure which was log transformed to normalize the distribution. There were no univariate outliers identified using Hoaglin and Iglewicz’s (1987) outlier labelling rule. There were three multivariate outliers identified using Mahalanobis distance, but excluding these outliers did not affect the pattern of results, so the remaining analyses were conducted on the full sample.

Preliminary analyses were conducted in SPSS to examine sample means and bivariate correlations among all variables. The main analyses were conducted in SPSS AMOS using Maximum Likelihood estimation. A path model was specified to examine how both forms of early adversity (family adversity and peer bullying) connected to weight/shape dissatisfaction. All variables were included as observed variables. The initial model tested several hypothesized pathways: (1) early adversity (family adversity and peer bullying, separately) predicting self-concept clarity; (2) early adversity (family adversity and peer bullying, separately) predicting difficulties in emotion regulation; (3) self-concept clarity predicting internalization and appearance comparisons; (4) internalization and appearance comparisons predicting weight/shape dissatisfaction; and (5) difficulties in emotion regulation predicting weight/shape dissatisfaction. Fig. 1 shows the integrated theoretical model illustrating these proposed relationships. Residuals of the two early adversity variables, of self-concept clarity and difficulties in emotion regulation, and of internalization and appearance comparisons, were allowed to covary.

Model fit was evaluated using several indices, with a good fit indicated by: (1) a non-significant χ^2 test: $p > .05$, although this test is often significant in large samples due to its sensitivity to sample size; (2) a cut-off value close to .95 for Comparative Fit Index (CFI); (3) a cut-off value close to .95 for Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI); (4) a cut-off value close to .06 for Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) (Hu & Bentler, 1999); and (5) a cut-off value close to .08 for Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) (Browne & Cudeck, 1993). Indirect effects were tested using bootstrapping with 1000 resamples and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals. Indirect effects were deemed significant when the bias-corrected confidence intervals did not include zero. Phantom variable models (Macho & Ledermann, 2011) were

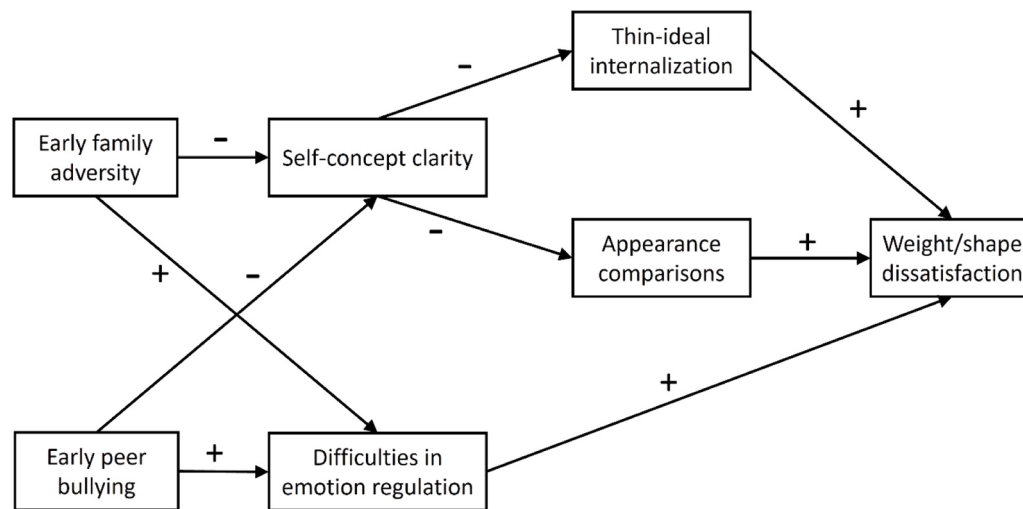


Fig. 1. Hypothesized Paths in the Extended Identity Disruption Model. Note. For the sake of clarity, covariances are not shown. + = hypothesized positive association between variables; - = hypothesized negative association between variables.

conducted to obtain estimates and confidence intervals for specific indirect effects (e.g., the indirect effect of early family adversity on weight/shape dissatisfaction through emotion regulation).

3. Results

3.1. Preliminary analyses

Table 1 presents sample means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations among all study variables. Notably, early family adversity and peer bullying were positively correlated with one another. Early family adversity and peer bullying were both negatively associated with self-concept clarity and positively associated with difficulties in emotion regulation. Self-concept clarity was negatively associated with difficulties in emotion regulation, internalization of appearance ideals, and appearance comparisons. Internalization and appearance comparisons were positively associated with weight/shape dissatisfaction, as were difficulties in emotion regulation.

3.2. Path model

The initially specified model did not fit the data particularly well, with four of the five criteria failing to meet the recommended cut-offs: χ^2 (9, $N = 316$) = 39.16, $p < .001$, CFI = .967, TLI = .922, SRMR = .071, RMSEA = .103 [LO90 = .071, HI90 = .137]. The direct path from peer bullying to self-concept clarity was not significant ($p = .529$), so that path was removed from the revised model. Furthermore, based on suggested modification indices as well as previous empirical research, the following paths were added: a direct path from family adversity to

weight/shape dissatisfaction (Vartanian et al., 2018); a covariance path between bullying and appearance comparisons (Thompson et al., 1999); and covariance paths between difficulties in emotion regulation and both internalization (Hutchison et al., 2020) and appearance comparisons (Ty & Francis, 2013). This revised model fit the data well, with all of the criteria meeting the recommended cut-offs: χ^2 (6, $N = 316$) = 10.01, $p = .124$, CFI = .996, TLI = .984, SRMR = .043, RMSEA = .046 [LO90 = .000, HI90 = .094]. The model explained 15% of the variance in self-concept clarity, 19% of the variance in difficulties in emotion regulation, 12% of the variance in internalization of appearance ideals, 17% of the variance in appearance comparisons, and 70% of the variance in weight/shape dissatisfaction. Early family adversity was negatively associated with self-concept clarity, and both forms of early adversity were positively associated with difficulties in emotion regulation. Self-concept clarity was negatively associated with internalization of appearance ideals and with appearance comparisons. Internalization and appearance comparisons were both positively associated with weight/shape dissatisfaction, as were difficulties in emotion regulation. Early family adversity was also positively associated with weight/shape dissatisfaction. Fig. 2 shows the standardized regression weights for the paths in the revised model.

Table 2 shows indirect effects and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals. Family adversity was indirectly associated with internalization of appearance ideals and appearance comparisons through self-concept clarity; self-concept clarity was indirectly associated with weight/shape dissatisfaction through internalization and appearance comparisons; and family adversity was indirectly associated with weight/shape dissatisfaction via the serial path of self-concept clarity and internalization/appearance comparisons. Family adversity and peer

Table 1
Sample means and bivariate correlations among all study variables.

Variable	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Fam	13.60 (8.46)	–					
2. Peer	7.39 (7.55)	.33***	–				
3. SCC	3.69 (1.19)	-.39***	-.21***	–			
4. Diff Emo	48.85 (13.15)	.41***	.30***	-.63***	–		
5. INT	3.60 (0.96)	.13*	.16**	-.34***	.36***	–	
6. COMP	2.12 (1.19)	.19***	.27***	-.42***	.38***	.64***	–
7. W/SD	3.13 (1.71)	.29***	.30***	-.45***	.46***	.70***	.79***

Note. Fam = Family adversity; Peer = Peer bullying; SCC = Self-concept clarity; Diff Emo = Difficulties in emotion regulation; INT = Internalization of appearance ideals; COMP = Appearance-based comparisons; W/SD = Weight/shape dissatisfaction. For the peer bullying measure, the raw mean and standard deviation are reported for clarity of interpretation; correlations are based on transformed values.

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

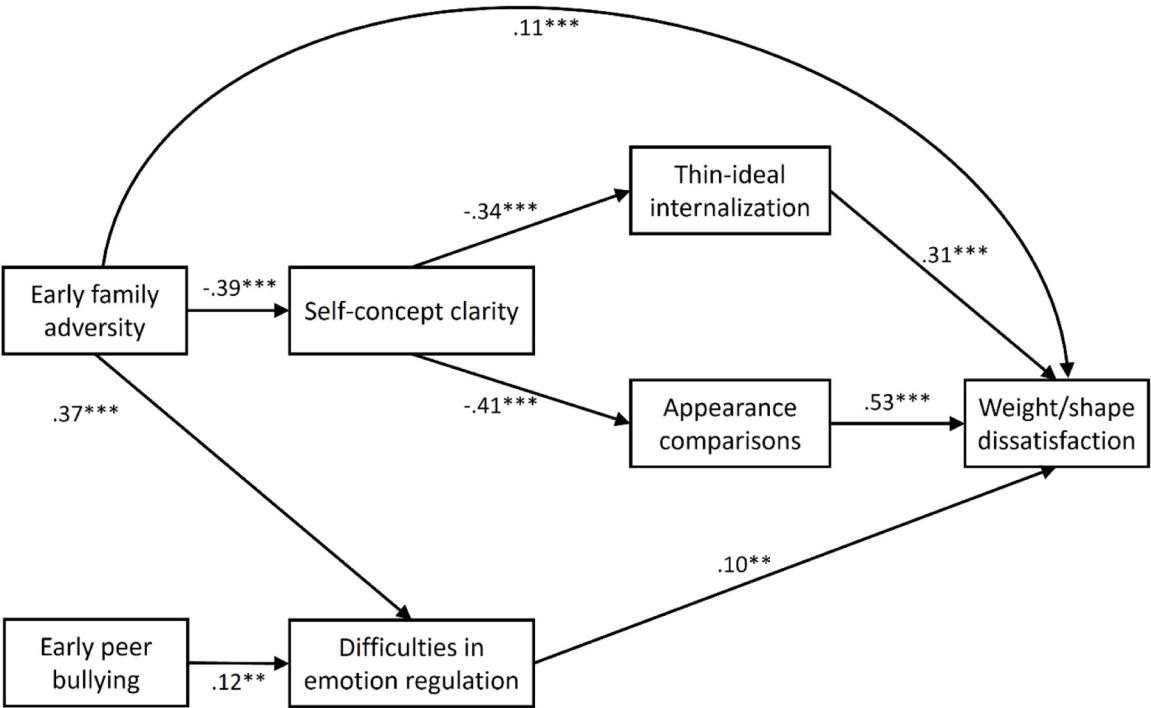


Fig. 2. Final Path Model. Note. All values are standardized regression weights. For clarity, residuals and covariances are not displayed. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 2
Indirect Effect Estimates and 95% Bias-Corrected Confidence Intervals.

Predictor	Mediator(s)	Outcome	B	SE	95% CI	
					LL	UL
Fam	SCC	INT	.015	.003	.010	.020
Fam	SCC	COMP	.022	.004	.014	.028
SCC	INT, COMP	W/SD	-.461	.057	-.550	-.362
Fam	SCC, INT, COMP	W/SD	.025	.005	.017	.033
Fam	Diff Emo	W/SD	.007	.003	.001	.012
Peer	Diff Emo	W/SD	.055	.035	.018	.147

Note. Fam = Family adversity; Peer = Peer bullying; SCC = Self-concept clarity; Diff Emo = Difficulties in emotion regulation; INT = Internalization of appearance ideals; COMP = Appearance comparisons; W/SD = Weight/shape dissatisfaction.

bullying were both, separately, indirectly associated with weight/shape dissatisfaction via difficulties in emotion regulation.

4. Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine two potential expansions of the Identity Disruption Model of body dissatisfaction. First, we examined whether peer bullying—like family-based adversity—would be associated with body dissatisfaction via self-concept clarity (and, subsequently, via sociocultural appearance processes). Second, we examined whether difficulties in emotion regulation could be another pathway (along with self-concept clarity) that could account for the connection between early adversity and body dissatisfaction. The overall path model fit the data well, explaining a substantial proportion (70%) of the variance in body dissatisfaction (operationalized as weight/shape dissatisfaction), and the core elements of the model replicated past research on the Identity Disruption Model (e.g., Vartanian et al., 2018, 2023). Next, we outline key findings related to the two novel additions to the model.

Peer bullying was significantly and negatively correlated with self-concept clarity in the bivariate correlations, but the magnitude of that

correlation ($r = -.21$) was weaker than was the correlation between family adversity and self-concept clarity ($r = -.39$). The differential magnitude of these associations is consistent with other research that has found more substantial correlations between family adversity and self-concept clarity ($r = -.42$; Hayward et al., 2020) than between peer bullying and self-concept clarity ($r = -.26$; Yang et al., 2024). The current study also showed that peer bullying did not predict self-concept clarity in the initial path analysis when early family adversity was also included in the model. These findings suggest that peer bullying may be associated with lower self-concept clarity, but to a lesser degree than is family adversity. One possible explanation for this difference relates to the potential for power imbalance in these two types of relationships: There is a power imbalance that is inherent in the parent-child relationship, but such power imbalance may not always be present in peer relationships. Research has shown that peer aggression involving power imbalance is linked with worse psychological outcomes than is aggression without such imbalances (Turner et al., 2017). Furthermore, power is thought to be related to self-concept clarity, insofar as those who lack interpersonal power have more difficulty maintaining a clear sense of their own personal identity (Hertel, 2018). Thus, considering the presence of power imbalance could be particularly important in future research examining the association between peer-bullying and self-concept clarity in the context of the Identity Disruption Model.

We also explored emotion regulation as an additional mechanism connecting early adversity to weight/shape dissatisfaction. Consistent with prior research (e.g., Miu et al., 2022), family adversity and peer bullying were both positively associated with difficulties in emotion regulation. Furthermore, there were indirect paths from both family adversity and peer bullying to weight/shape dissatisfaction via difficulties in emotion regulation. This indirect path has been shown in previous research on peer bullying among men (Wang et al., 2025), and the current study extends that research by demonstrating the same pattern among women, and also extending the association to family adversity. Although difficulties in emotion regulation have been shown to be associated with body dissatisfaction in previous research (e.g., Lavender & Anderson, 2010; Momeñe et al., 2023), there is no clear

explanation for *why* the two variables are associated. It may be that difficulties in emotion regulation are a general risk factor for poor mental health (Miu et al., 2022), which also includes body dissatisfaction and disordered eating. Alternatively, it may be that difficulties in emotion regulation result in increased negative affect, which is then internalized and manifests as negative feelings toward one's appearance (Momeñe et al., 2023). Future research should examine these possibilities.

Regarding the relevance of emotion regulation to the core components of the Identity Disruption Model, there was a strong (inverse) association between self-concept clarity and emotion regulation, and there were significance covariance paths between emotion regulation and the sociocultural appearance processes (internalization and appearance comparisons). We did not, however, include structural paths from emotion regulation to self-concept clarity or to the sociocultural appearance processes in the tested model due to a lack of previous research pointing to the directionality of these associations. Future research (including longitudinal studies) is needed to map the temporal sequencing of the relationship between emotion regulation and the other variables in the Identity Disruption Model. It is also possible that emotion regulation could act as a moderator in the context of the Identity Disruption Model, such as by altering the impact of early adversity on self-concept clarity, or by changing how people manage their emotions following an appearance comparison. Finally, in the current study, we assessed participants' self-reported difficulties in emotion regulation at a trait level, but people also differ in the types of emotion regulation strategies they tend to employ (e.g., reappraisal vs. rumination; Naragon-Gainey et al., 2017). It is possible that self-concept clarity is associated with the use of different types of emotion regulation strategies, and consequently with the degree of body dissatisfaction that people experience following an appearance comparison. These are questions that could be addressed in future research.

4.1. Limitations and future directions

The most notable limitation of the current study is the cross-sectional, retrospective nature of the data, which precludes any evidence about the causal direction or temporal sequencing of the variables. Emerging research related to the Identity Disruption Model has provided support for the model using a range of methodologies. For example, lower self-concept clarity has been shown to prospectively predict changes in internalization and appearance comparisons over time (Vartanian & Nicholls, 2024), and ecological momentary assessment studies have found that momentary self-concept clarity predicted internalization and appearance comparisons at a subsequent timepoint in people's everyday lives (Tang et al., 2026). There is also evidence that peer-related bullying prospectively predicts body dissatisfaction (Day et al., 2022). Thus, the model outline in this paper provides a promising account of the factors contributing to the development of body dissatisfaction, but future longitudinal research is needed to confirm the prospective associations among the variables. It is also important for future experimental work to determine whether modifying self-concept clarity or emotion regulation could reduce vulnerability to sociocultural appearance processes and body dissatisfaction.

Another limitation of the current study is the reliance on a convenience sample of female university students. We chose this sample because body dissatisfaction is particularly heightened in this group, and because we wanted to keep the sample relatively homogeneous for the purpose of testing two potential extensions of the model, but doing so necessarily limits the generalizability of the findings. Although it would be important for future research to replicate and extend these findings to other populations, there is reason to believe that the findings would hold across different samples. For example, the core aspects of the Identity Disruption Model have been observed among participants who identify as men as well as those who identify as women (Vartanian et al., 2018, 2023); among adolescents and community adults (Vartanian

et al., 2018, 2023); and among participants who identify as White as well as those who identify as Asian (Vartanian et al., 2025). Furthermore, the study by Wang et al. (2025) showing that peer bullying was associated with body dissatisfaction via emotion dysregulation was conducted with adult men. That said, one set of populations that should be included in future research is sexual and gender minority groups. Body dissatisfaction is known to be heightened in these groups (e.g., Santoniccolo et al., 2025), but the processes outlined in the Identity Disruption Model have not been systematically examined in these groups. Thus, future research should explore the validity of the Identity Disruption Model in those populations.

4.2. Conclusions

This research examined two potential extensions of the Identity Disruption Model of body dissatisfaction: peer bullying as an additional form of early adversity, and emotion regulation as an additional mechanism connecting early adversity to body dissatisfaction. The frequency of experiencing peer bullying was negatively correlated with self-concept clarity, but this association was no longer significant when family adversity was included in the model, highlighting the potential relevance of the power differential between perpetrator and victim in this context. Early adversity was indirectly linked to body dissatisfaction via difficulties in emotion regulation, but the nature of the relationship between emotion regulation and the core aspects of the Identity Disruption Model (self-concept clarity and sociocultural appearance processes) may be more complex. Overall, these findings suggest that peer bullying and emotion regulation could be useful extensions of the Identity Disruption Model, but a more nuanced consideration of these factors is needed to fully understand their role in this framework. Identifying the early life experiences that increase vulnerability is important because doing so can help identify at-risk individuals who would benefit from interventions aimed at reducing body dissatisfaction. Furthermore, identifying the mechanisms connecting early life experiences to body dissatisfaction is important because doing so can highlight specific factors that could be targeted in interventions.

Ethics declaration

Written informed consent to take part in the study and to publish the article has been obtained from all participants or their legal representatives. The privacy rights of participants have been observed.

This study was performed in compliance with relevant laws, regulatory frameworks and guidelines where the research took place. This study was approved by the UNSW Sydney. (Approval No. iRECS8930)

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Mahika Parmar: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.
Vartanian Lenny: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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