



The Pursuit of Beauty and How it Relates to Me: Exploring the Role of Self-Construal Subdimensions in Appearance Concerns

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Abstract

Despite the rise of body positivity movements, appearance concerns remain widespread, affecting individuals' well-being. Prior research suggests that interdependent self-construal (i.e., defining the self in relation to significant others) is associated with heightened appearance concerns, potentially driven by norm conformity. However, self-construal is multidimensional, and which specific subdimensions influence appearance concerns remains unclear. This survey study addresses this question by examining the relationships between self-construal subdimensions and appearance concerns in a sample of international and local first-year psychology students. To further confirm that our subdimensional approach is more relevant for studying appearance concerns than general self-construal approach, our correlational analyses were followed by regression analyses. Findings challenge previous assumptions, showing that seeking harmony, rather than norm conformity, plays a more significant role in appearance concerns and confirmed that a subdimensional approach was more relevant for understanding these concerns.

Keywords: self-construal subdimensions, appearance concerns, harmony-seeking, undergraduate student, survey study, correlation, regression analysis

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Introduction

Despite the rise of body positivity and self-acceptance movements in recent years (Strauss, 2021), the quest for beauty remains as strong as ever. Influencers continue to market their beauty tools and tips to their hoard of followers while the plastic surgery industry is flourishing more than ever (American Society of Plastic Surgeons, 2023). As excessive concerns regarding one's appearance are linked to various adverse outcomes for someone's well-being (Stewart et al., 2023), understanding the psycho-social mechanisms behind these concerns is crucial to designing effective interventions that mitigate their impact.

Research has highlighted the role of self-construals (i.e., how individuals define themselves in relation to their social environment; Markus & Kitayama, 1991) in shaping appearance concerns, with higher *interdependent* self-construal (i.e., defining the self more in terms of social roles and relationships with others; Markus & Kitayama, 1991) linked to increased concerns (Madan et al., 2018). However, the underlying mechanisms behind this relationship remain unclear. While conformity to norms has been proposed as a potential driver (Madan et al., 2018), self-construal is a complex, multifaceted construct that includes but extends beyond norm conformity. Notably, the literature identifies six additional subdimensions through which individuals may construe their selves more interdependently or independently (Vignoles et al., 2016), raising the question of which subdimensions play the most significant role in influencing appearance concerns.

To address this, we conducted a survey study with international and local first-year psychology students to examine the relationships between self-construal subdimensions and appearance concerns. By identifying which subdimensions best predict these concerns, we

aim to deepen our understanding of the psycho-social mechanisms involved and inform future interventions.

Benefits and Risks of Appearance Concerns

Appearance concerns are a common aspect of the human social experience. Evidence suggests an innate human inclination toward beauty, with children showing a preference for attractive faces even before significant educational influences (Langlois et al., 1991). This natural tendency is then further reinforced by societal influences. The notion that "what is beautiful is good" (Dion et al., 1972) is ingrained early through popular culture, advertisements, and social interactions, where messages about the value of beauty are constantly conveyed (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003; Johnson et al., 2014; Northup & Liebler, 2010; Vermeir & Van De Sompel, 2015). A well-known example is fairy tales that promote the value of beauty from a young age by typically portraying beautiful main characters as good and unattractive characters as evil.

Later in life, attractiveness comes with substantial tangible social benefits, further highlighting the social dimension of appearance concerns. Attractive individuals are consistently perceived more favorably by their peers across various domains. Among other things, they are expected to have a higher status and be happier, more intelligent, and more trustworthy (Dion et al., 1972; Gutiérrez-García et al., 2018; Rahal et al., 2021). Such bias even extends beyond mere judgment, as attractive individuals also experience better outcomes in numerous social situations, such as earning more money, being more likely to be hired, receiving more votes in politics, and facing lighter criminal sentencing (Berggren et al., 2006; Hamermesh, 2013; Jackson, 1983; Mazzella & Feingold, 1994; Sigelman et al., 1986). Thus, there may be good reason for people to be socially concerned about their appearance.

However, while some level of focus on appearance seems natural (Langlois et al., 1991), for some individuals, appearance concerns can become excessive or even pathological, leading to various adverse outcomes for their well-being. Among other negative consequences, high levels of appearance concern are associated with lower self-esteem, heightened self-consciousness and anxiety, and a greater risk of developing eating disorders or depression (González-Nuevo et al., 2021; Paxton et al., 2006; Stewart et al., 2023). Excessive preoccupation with one's appearance is a key feature of eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia, as well as other mental health issues such as social anxiety disorder (SAD) and body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) (Stewart et al., 2023). These pathological concerns underscore the need to understand the psycho-social mechanisms behind individual differences in appearance concerns. In this thesis, I focus on the role of specific self-construals, which have emerged as a key factor in understanding the psycho-social determinants of appearance concerns (Madan et al., 2018)

Self-Construal and Appearance Concerns

Introduced by Markus and Kitayama (1991), self-construal refers to how individuals define themselves in relation to their social environment, either as more interdependent or independent from others. It originated from the observation of diverse 'modes of being' across cultures. In individualistic societies (primarily found in North America and Western Europe), a belief appears to prevail that everyone is unique and possesses a distinct set of attributes, promoting behaviors that highlight these qualities. This cultural context leads individuals to see themselves as more separate from others and their social environment, a perspective known as independent self-construal. In contrast, collectivist societies, primarily found in regions outside the West, emphasize humans' fundamental connection to each other. These beliefs encourage behaviors prioritizing fitting in and maintaining relationships, leading

individuals to see themselves as more connected to others and their social environment. This mode of functioning is known as interdependent self-construal.

Unsurprisingly, the initial interest in self-construal within the field of appearance concerns emerged from a cross-cultural perspective (Madan et al., 2018), driven by the observation that cultural differences exist in the extent to which individuals strive for beauty. In particular, attention has been drawn to the high prevalence of appearance concerns in Asia, with examples such as Japan spending the most annually on skincare (Asmar, 2023) and high interest in plastic surgery observed in Korea and Singapore, as indicated by surgery rates and online trends (Gallup, 2020; Google Trends, 2023). Building on this observation, Madan et al. (2018) were the first to examine the role of self-construal in appearance concerns. They successfully demonstrated a positive relationship between interdependent self-construal and appearance concerns in a cross-cultural study comparing the consumer behaviors of Chinese and Canadian women.

The present study builds on and moves beyond this cultural perspective by investigating individual differences in self-construal as a determinant of appearance concerns (i.e., regardless of the culture to which an individual belongs). Indeed, variation in self-construal exists as much across cultures as within them, with individuals in predominantly independent societies exhibiting varying degrees of interdependence and those in interdependent cultures varying levels of independence (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Snibbe & Markus, 2005). This variability suggests that self-construal may account not only for cross-cultural differences in appearance concerns but also for differences at the individual level. Therefore, the present study examines self-construal as a determinant of individual variation in appearance concerns, regardless of cultural context.

Exploring General Self-Construal and Specific Self-Construal Dimensions

This study aims to uncover the mechanisms underlying the relationship demonstrated between an individual's self-construal and appearance concerns. As noted, when comparing the consumer behavior of Chinese and Canadian women, Madan et al. (2018) found that Chinese participants were more willing to purchase beauty products compared to their Canadian counterparts. Accordingly, their positive attitudes toward these products correlated with their level of *interdependent* self-construal, which the authors attributed to participants' tendency to conform to social norms. Indeed, the society in which an individual evolves dictates a series of norms regarding what and who is considered beautiful. Anyone who seeks to be perceived as attractive must conform to these norms (Steinberg, 2015).

However, this explanation needs to be tested, and ideally against other explanations based on different aspects of perceiving oneself as more interdependent, which may make someone increasingly more concerned about their appearance (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Vignoles et al. (2016) identified seven subdimensions of in- and interdependent self-construal that may offer a more specific explanation for why interdependent self-construal should be positively related to appearance concerns.

Through this subdimensional framework, Vignoles et al. (2016) were the first to argue that defining one's self-construal as globally independent or interdependent was oversimplified. In line with this theoretical reasoning, we believe that employing a unidimensional self-construal when studying appearance concerns oversimplifies its role in such concerns. Instead, adopting the subdimensional framework proposed by Vignoles et al. (2016) would offer a more precise and detailed understanding of the mechanisms through which self-construal affects appearance concerns. Accordingly, this study investigates the correlations between the self-construal subdimensions identified by Vignoles et al. (2016) and appearance concerns to discern which subdimension(s) most strongly influence variation in

appearance concerns. This study will also include a broader general self-construal measure to test directly our hypothesis that a more specific subdimensional framework is more relevant for understanding appearance concerns than a general self-construal measure. In this way, we can compare general self-construals explanatory power with specific subdimensions. In line with Madan et al.'s (2018) findings that a higher level of interdependence is associated with subsequently heightened appearance concerns, we expect a positive correlation between participants' general interdependent self-construal and their appearance concerns (H1).

However, by zooming in on Vignoles et al.'s (2016) self-construal subdimensions, we can infer different paths through which interdependent self-construal might influence appearance concerns. As noted, Madan et al. (2018) attributed the relationship they found to participants' tendency to conform to societal norms. In fact, conformity to norms constituted their key argument for investigating the role of self-construal in appearance concerns. This norm-conformity aspect of self-construal is known in Vignoles et al.'s (2016) framework as 'self-direction versus receptiveness to influence' and constitutes one of the seven self-construal subdimensions. It reflects how individuals with higher interdependence are more likely to align their behavior with group expectations and norms rather than personal motivations, while those with higher independence tend to prioritize personal goals over societal expectations. Accordingly, Madan et al. (2018) suggested that their Chinese participants displayed more significant concern for their appearance due to an interdependent inclination to respond more strongly to societal expectations. In contrast, their Canadian participants placed less emphasis on their physical appearance due to an independent tendency to be less sensitive to societal expectations. Therefore, we expect (H2) a positive correlation between participants' *receptiveness to influence* aspect of their self-construal and their appearance concerns. In line with Madan et al.'s (2018) intuition that this tendency to

conform to norms underlies the relationship between general interdependent self-construal and appearance concerns, we expect that (H3) *receptiveness to influence* mediates the relationship between general interdependent self-construal and appearance concerns. Indeed, given that it was the initial argument that sparked interest in exploring self-construal in relation to appearance concerns, receptiveness to influence emerges as the primary subdimension of interest in our study.

However, since the role of receptiveness to influence in this relationship has yet to be explicitly tested, this leaves room for alternative explanations and further investigation. Specifically, this study also explores the relationship between appearance concerns and the other self-construal dimensions we identified a priori as theoretically relevant to those concerns. First, the *difference versus similarity* subdimension may also play a significant role in the relationship between interdependence and appearance-related concerns. This subdimension captures the extent to which individuals seek to stand out and be unique versus aligning with and resembling others. A preference for difference is linked to a more independent way of functioning, while a preference for similarity corresponds to a more interdependent approach (Vignoles et al., 2016). People who prioritize *similarity* may adjust their appearance to match with the group, a dynamic commonly observed in social trends, where members of the same social group tend to share similar clothing, hairstyles, or other style elements (Rose et al., 1994). Such alignment might be restrictive, limiting how individuals present themselves and leading to concerns about whether they succeed in matching the group's appearance. In contrast, individuals who emphasize *difference* might use their appearance to assert their uniqueness from their group. This focus on self-distinction might allow for greater freedom in self-presentation, lowering concerns.

This idea that individuals use their appearance either to assert their uniqueness or to emphasize their belonging to a group also suggests, in other words, that people use their appearance to express themselves (Aghaei et al., 2017), bringing us to a second subdimension of interest: *self-expression versus harmony*. This dimension refers to how individuals prioritize expressing their personal preferences and views or aligning with group norms and values to maintain harmony and cohesion. The former is associated with independence, while the latter reflects interdependence (Vignoles et al., 2016). Individuals prioritizing *self-expression* might use their appearance to communicate information about their personalities, tastes, affiliations, and interests (e.g., wearing a T-shirt with a rock band logo signals someone's musical tastes) (Aghaei et al., 2017). Similar to the previous dimension, it may offer more freedom, allowing individuals to present themselves as they choose, leading to fewer concerns. In contrast, for people prioritizing *harmony*, making an effort to look attractive might be seen as a way to align with group norms and values to maintain harmony, as modern society emphasizes the importance of maintaining an attractive and appropriate appearance (Dion et al., 1972; Halim et al., 2024), which may introduce constraints and heighten appearance-related concerns.

Finally, we also consider the role of the *self-containment versus connection to others* subdimension. This last subdimension refers to the extent to which individuals define themselves independently or through their emotional ties and roles within close relationships and social groups, with the latter indicating a higher level of interdependence (Vignoles et al., 2016). Individuals high in self-containment might feel less compelled to care about their appearance and how they come across to others, as they rely on themselves for validation and fulfillment. Conversely, those with a stronger connection to others may experience more significant appearance concerns because their sense of self is more closely tied to their

relationships and social context. For them, maintaining an attractive appearance might be a way to meet social expectations, foster positive relationships, and reinforce their bonds with others.

On this theoretical basis, our study aimed to test, based on Madan et al. (2018), whether interdependent self-construal is positively related to appearance concerns and whether receptiveness to influence would mediate this relationship. In addition, we will explore three supplementary self-construal subdimensions (difference versus similarity, self-expression versus harmony, and self-containment versus connection to others) to understand whether those would offer better explanations. To do so, we surveyed international and local first-year psychology students to examine the relationships between self-construal, its subdimensions, and appearance concerns.

Method

Design and Participants

This study employed a correlational design with general interdependent self-construal as the predictor, the subdimension 'receptiveness to influence' as the mediator, and appearance concerns as the outcome variable. The other subdimensions of self-construal were treated exploratively as additional predictors.

We conducted an a priori power analysis using G*Power 3.1 with a two-tailed test, $\alpha = 0.05$, and power $(1-\beta) = 0.80$. The analysis indicated that a sample of 193 participants would be required to detect a minimal effect size of $r = 0.14$ (based on Madan et al., 2018 effect size) with 80% power. Based on this, and to buffer against drop-out, we recruited 239 participants, achieving a power greater than 99% to detect an effect size of $r = 0.2$. The participants were primarily first-year psychology students from the University of Groningen, including both local and international students. This selection ensured a moderate to adequate

range of variance across the different subdimensions of self-construal (as detailed later in the descriptives part of the Results section).

Participants were mainly recruited through the University of Groningen's SONA participant pool, with a very small number recruited via public advertisements on Facebook groups popular among international students in Groningen. The recruitment through social media was initially attempted to ensure we had enough participants within the required timeframe, but it ended up being unnecessary and non-fruitful, as only three participants were recruited through this method. We compensated participants from the SONA participant pool with partial course credits, while others, with their knowledge and consent, did not receive any compensation.

Out of the 239 participants initially recruited, six were excluded from the final analysis for not completing the survey beyond the demographic questions, leaving 233 participants for analysis (which was still above the target we estimated and hence did not indicate a threat to the statistical power of the study). The final sample included 175 women (75.1%), 54 men (23.2%), two non-binary individuals (0.9%), and two participants who preferred not to disclose their gender (0.9%).

In terms of nationality, 136 participants were from the Netherlands (58.4%), 37 from Germany (15.9%), and 60 (25.8%) from other countries. Most participants were between 18 and 29 years old ($n = 229$, 98.3%). Two were aged 30-39 years (0.9%), one was 40-49 years old (0.4%), and one was aged 50-59 years old (0.4%). No participants were 60 years or older.

Procedure

Before conducting the study, we obtained ethical approval from the Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of Groningen (Research Code: PSY-2324-S0159). The study was conducted through a 10-minute long online Qualtrics

survey. Before accessing the survey, participants read an information form providing details of the study to help them decide whether to participate. The study was introduced as a study focusing on people's self-care behaviors, while specific goals to investigate appearance-related concerns and cultural differences in self-construal were withheld from participants. This approach aimed to minimize bias in participants' responses from demand characteristics and to attract a more diverse sample rather than one primarily composed of individuals with a strong interest in appearance-related topics. The complete study goal and the rationale for withholding information were disclosed to participants in a debriefing form after the study. After actively consenting to the study, participants engaged in a survey comprising demographic questions and several psychometric scales relative to the study variables, as detailed below.

Measures

Participants reported basic demographic information, including their *age range*, *nationality*, and *gender*, through multiple-choice questions. The demographic questions were followed by a series of scales designed to assess the key constructs of our study. All scales (except the Appearance Concerns scale) consisted of statements to which participants indicated the extent to which each applied to them. Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from -3 (*very untrue of me*) to 3 (*very true of me*). Instructions for the Appearance Concern scale slightly differed. Participants answered how often they engage in a series of behaviors in their daily lives related to their appearance. Responses ranged from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*very frequently*). Scale scores were calculated using an average score for each participant on each scale. Please refer to Appendix A for the complete list of items included in the study.

Independent Variables

Interdependent self-construal and *independent self-construal* were treated as two separate dimensions based on past research (Singelis, 1994) and measured with different single items: "In general, I see myself as separate from others" for independent self-construal and "In general, I see myself as dependent on others" for interdependent self-construal. We designed these items specifically for the study to capture self-construal at a general and abstract level. Supporting the distinction between the two dimensions, the two self-construals showed no significant correlation ($r(231) = -0.003$).

By contrast, the four *self-construal subdimensions* we focused on (i.e., self-direction versus receptiveness to influence, difference versus similarity, self-expression versus harmony, and self-containment versus connection to others) were measured using key items from Vignoles et al.'s (2016) scales. In order to minimize survey fatigue, we did not want the study to be unnecessarily long. Hence, prior to data collection, we selected four to six items for each scale. Only items with strong correlations to their respective dimensions in previous research (primarily above .300) were retained from the original scales. Items that strongly correlated with other dimensions or were deemed irrelevant to the study were also excluded a priori.

Following data collection, further refinements were made again, guided by factor analyses and reliability assessments. The Appendix contains a complete list of items included and excluded from the study, both before and after analysis. All scales reached acceptable reliability ($\alpha > 0.60$) after refinement, except for the Self-Containment versus Connection to Others scale, which could not be improved and was thus excluded from the subsequent analyses.

The Self-Direction versus Receptiveness to Influence scale reached a reliability of $\alpha = .61$ after one of its items was deleted, resulting in a four-item scale. This scale measures the extent to which individuals align their behavior with personal values and goals (self-direction) versus external influences such as others' expectations and opinions (receptiveness to influence). A sample item is "Other people's wishes have an important influence on the choices I make."

The Difference versus Similarity scale reached a reliability of $\alpha = .76$ without requiring further refinement, resulting in a four-item scale. People high on difference value being unique and different from others, while those high on similarity prioritize fitting in and resembling others. A sample item is "I enjoy being unique and different from others in many ways."

The Harmony scale reached a reliability of $\alpha = .63$ following the deletion of two non-robust items. The scale was reduced to a two-item version, which led to the exclusion of its Self-Expression dimension. Higher scores on this scale indicate more value placed on maintaining smooth and harmonious relationships within social groups, as illustrated by the sample item: "It is important to maintain harmony within my group."

Dependent Variables

Appearance concern was conceptualized based on Brown et al.'s (1990) definition as the level of attention and importance one allocates to one's appearance. As such, it represents a cognitive dimension that carries affective and behavioral implications. This conceptualization intentionally contrasts with Madan et al.'s (2018) consumer-oriented approach, which relied solely on a specific behavioral implication (i.e., participants'

purchasing behaviors), thus overlooking the cognitive scope of appearance concerns beyond consumer behavior.

In line with this conceptualization, we measured appearance concerns through the Appearance Orientation scale (MBSRQ-AO) developed by Brown et al. (1990). A sample item is: "Before going out in public, I always notice how I look." One item from the original scale, "I am self-conscious if my grooming is not right," was omitted a priori to prevent overlap with a new scale we developed in the study (Anxious Experience of Beauty Concern; see below). This resulted in an 11-item scale ($\alpha = .85$) where higher scores indicated correspondingly higher cognitive importance and attention given to one's appearance and more behaviors to maintain or enhance one's appearance.

To address the affective implications of Brown et al.'s (2019) definition, we developed two additional outcome scales: *Anxious Experience of Beauty Concern* and *Secure Experience of Beauty Concern*. These scales were designed to differentiate between negative and positive emotional and behavioral implications of appearance concerns. The Anxious Experience of Beauty Concern scale captured negative emotions and anxiety related to beauty concerns, with a higher score indicating more significant anxiety. A sample item is: "If I don't feel like I look good, this can really ruin my day". In contrast, the Secure Experience of Beauty Concern scale captures positive emotional and motivational responses associated with beauty concerns and related activities. It reflects a sense of empowerment and belief in the benefits of self-care, with a higher score indicating greater security. A sample item is: "After taking care of my appearance, I feel rather empowered." Factor analyses confirmed that the scales represented separate dimensions, with both the Secure Experience of Beauty Concern scale (α

= .854) and the Anxious Experience of Beauty Concern scale ($\alpha = .819$) demonstrating high internal consistency¹.

Statistical Analysis Plan

We used SPSS (IBM Corp., 2024) for all analyses. The first and second hypotheses were tested through correlations to examine (H1) the positive relationship between interdependent self-construal and appearance concerns and (H2) the positive relationship between receptiveness to influence and appearance concerns. Additional correlational analysis explored the relationships between all additional predictors and outcomes. The third hypothesis was to be tested through a mediation model evaluating whether (H3) receptiveness to influence mediates the relationship between general self-construal and appearance concerns. Finally, to determine which model (general versus specific dimensions of self-construal) is more relevant for understanding appearance concerns, we used regression analysis to compare the explanatory power of the general self-construal measure against the self-construal subdimensions in explaining appearance concerns.

Results

Table 1 lists each scale's mean and standard deviation (SD) and the correlations between them. Below, we first test the hypotheses and then explore potential alternatives.

Hypothesis Testing

Our first hypothesis (H1), based on Madan et al. (2018), predicted a positive correlation between participants' interdependent self-construal and appearance concerns.

Although a weak correlation was observed in the expected direction ($r = .11$, $p = .108$), it

¹ We introduced these measures because, as outlined in our introduction, our focus on appearance concerns stems from their potential pathological consequences. This differentiation could be useful for future interventions as it could help shed light on how to enhance the secure aspects of appearance concerns while alleviating the anxious effects.

failed to reach statistical significance, leading us to reject H1. Interestingly, when investigating the relationship between interdependent self-construal relationship and the additional outcome variables, a weak, marginally significant correlation ($r = .13, p = .054$) emerged with *anxious* experience of beauty concern.

Our second hypothesis (H2), based on Madan et al. (2018), proposed a positive correlation between participants' receptiveness to influence and their level of appearance concerns (H2). However, the observed correlation was nearly zero and non-significant ($r = -.02, p = .745$), leading to the rejection of H2. Once again, when investigating the relationships between receptiveness to influence and the additional outcome variables, a weak significant positive correlation ($r = .13, p = .044$) emerged with *anxious* experience of beauty concern.

Beyond simple correlations, according to Madan et al. (2018), we also expected receptiveness to mediate the relationship between general self-construal and appearance concerns (H3). However, the absence of significant correlations between (a) general self-construal and appearance concerns and (b) receptiveness to influence and appearance concerns led us to reject H3.

After testing these hypotheses, we also explored the relationships between our additional self-construal subdimensions and our three outcomes, asking whether a different subdimension than receptiveness to influence might be related to the outcome of interest. As can be seen in Table 1, above all, it was the harmony subdimension that emerged as the strongest predictor among all subdimensions, surpassing receptiveness to influence and general interdependent self-construal and displaying significant positive correlations with all three outcomes: appearance concerns ($r = .15, p = .022$), anxious experiences of beauty concern ($r = .16, p = .017$), and secure experiences of beauty concern ($r = .22, p < .001$).

Although we did not predict this, these findings descriptively indicate harmony's consistent relevance across all the outcome measures of interest, underscoring its potential importance in appearance-related concerns. We will discuss this further in the Discussion section.

Table 1*Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of Scales*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. General Interdependent Self-construal <i>M</i> = -.02, <i>SD</i> = 1.37		.00 (.960)	.36** ($<.001$)	.17** (.009)	.09 (.157)	.11 (.108)	.13 (.054)	.00 (.980)
2. General independent self-construal <i>M</i> = 1.08, <i>SD</i> = 1.28			.04 (.56)	-.15* (.022)	-.14* (.035)	-.01 (.840)	.02 (.783)	.09 (.167)
3. Self-Direction versus Receptiveness to Influence <i>M</i> = -0.9, <i>SD</i> = 0.84				.26* ($<.001$)	.14* (.031)	-.02 (.745)	.13* (.044)	.04 (.525)
4. Difference versus Similarity <i>M</i> = -0.79, <i>SD</i> = 1					.11 (.110)	.10 (.146)	.13 (.058)	-.05 (.450)
5. Harmony <i>M</i> = 1.27, <i>SD</i> = 0.88						.15* (.022)	.16* (.017)	.22** ($<.001$)
6. Appearance concerns <i>M</i> = 3.46, <i>SD</i> = 0.71							.61** ($<.001$)	.56** ($<.001$)
7. Insecure experience of beauty <i>M</i> = 0.53, <i>SD</i> = 1.43								.40** ($<.001$)
8. Secure experience of beauty <i>M</i> = 1.52, <i>SD</i> = 1.12								

Note: *N* = 233. Values in parentheses indicate *p*-values. **p* < .05. ***p* < .01.

In summary, while our hypotheses were not supported on the key outcome of appearance concern, exploratory analyses revealed a consistent set of significant correlations, suggesting a potentially alternative explanation of why interdependent self-construals may facilitate appearance concerns. Specifically, the (interdependent) subdimension of harmony was positively associated with all three outcomes: appearance concerns, secure experiences of

beauty concern, and anxious experiences of beauty concern.

Regression Analysis

The second key question raised by our study was whether specific subdimensions of self-construal were more relevant than general self-construal (i.e., offered greater explanatory power) when predicting appearance-related concerns. The findings highlighted in the previous section, where harmony showed the strongest correlation with our three outcomes of interest, led us to focus our analysis on the harmony subdimension.

We conducted three multiple regression analyses to determine whether harmony was more predictive of appearance-related concerns than general interdependent self-construal. Each analysis included harmony and interdependent self-construal as independent variables and examined one of the following dependent variables: appearance concerns, anxious experience of beauty concern, and secure experience of beauty concern.

Before conducting analyses, we ensured that the assumptions for multiple linear regression were met for the three models. We confirmed the independence of the observations by a Durbin-Watson statistic with all values between 1.5 and 2.5 (1.93, 191, 172). We verified linearity and homoscedasticity through scatterplots and partial regression plots.

Multicollinearity between harmony and interdependent self-construal was assessed using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), which held a value of 1.02, indicating no multicollinearity among the predictors. Potential outliers were examined using Cook's Distance, and no significant issues were identified. Finally, the normality of residuals was confirmed using a Normal P-P Plot, suggesting that the residuals were approximately normally distributed.

The regression analysis with appearance concerns as the dependent variable showed that harmony was a significant predictor ($\beta = 0.14$, $t(230) = 2.16$, $p = .032$), whereas

interdependent self-construal was not significant ($\beta = 0.09$, $t(230) = 1.42$, $p = .157$).

Therefore, the harmony subdimension was a better predictor of appearance concerns than general interdependent self-construal

Similarly, the regression analysis with anxious experience of beauty concern as the dependent variable revealed that harmony was a significant predictor ($\beta = 0.15$, $t(230) = 2.24$, $p = .026$). In contrast, interdependent self-construal was not ($\beta = 0.11$, $t(230) = 1.74$, $p = .083$), mirroring the results observed for appearance concerns.

Finally, the regression analysis with secure experiences of beauty as the dependent variable confirmed harmony as a significant predictor ($\beta = 0.22$, $t(230) = 3.60$, $p < .001$), while interdependent self-construal was not ($\beta = -0.02$, $t(230) = -.34$, $p = .736$), once again mirroring the above findings.

Hence, across all three outcome variables, the harmony dimension of interdependent self-construal consistently outperformed general interdependent self-construal, highlighting the key role that this aspect of self-construal may play in appearance-related concerns, including both anxious and secure beauty experiences.

Mediation analysis

While our primary hypotheses regarding the role of receptiveness to influence were not supported, and regression analyses confirmed the importance of harmony instead in predicting appearance concerns, we also noted an unexpected pattern in our correlation results regarding anxious experience of beauty concerns. Interdependent self-construal showed a marginally significant correlation with anxious experience of beauty, while receptiveness to influence was significantly correlated with it. This suggests the possibility that our hypothesis

might still hold specifically for the anxious dimension of appearance concerns, underscoring the necessity for a posteriori investigation.

To explore this possibility, we conducted additional analyses to examine whether receptiveness to influence mediates the relationship between interdependent self-construal and anxious experience of beauty concerns. While the correlation between interdependent self-construal and anxious experience of beauty was only borderline significant, suggesting no robust direct effect, the significant correlation between receptiveness to influence and anxious experience of beauty might still suggest a potential indirect effect.

We tested this possibility through a Sobel test. Results indicated that interdependent self-construal significantly predicted receptiveness to influence ($b = .22$, $SE = .04$, $p < .001$). However, receptiveness to influence did not significantly predict anxious experience of beauty ($b = .17$, $SE = .12$, $p = .155$), and the direct effect of interdependent self-construal on anxious experience of beauty was also non-significant ($b = .10$, $SE = .07$, $p = .192$). Finally, the Sobel test showed that the indirect effect was not significant ($z = 1.38$, $p = .167$), indicating that receptiveness to influence did not mediate the effect of interdependent self-construal on anxious experience of beauty concerns.

Thus, neither our primary hypotheses nor our additional exploratory analyses supported receptiveness to influence mediating role in influencing any form of appearance concerns outcomes. Instead, our findings consistently highlighted harmony as a key subdimension of interdependent self-construal in explaining variance in appearance concerns.

Discussion

This survey study investigated the relationship formally introduced by Madan et al. (2018) between interdependent self-construal and appearance concerns, with a particular focus on specific subdimensions of self-construal (Vignoles et al., 2016). While our primary

hypotheses, based on Madan et al. (2018), focused on the relationships between general interdependent self-construal, receptiveness to influence, and appearance concerns, we also explored additional relationships involving other self-construal subdimensions and secure and anxious experiences of beauty concern as more specific aspects of appearance concerns.

Based on Madan et al.'s (2018) findings, we expected a positive correlation between participants' general interdependent self-construal and their appearance concerns (H1).

Although the relationship was in the expected direction, the relationship was too weak to be considered statistically significant. Moreover, still based on Madan et al. (2018), we expected the receptiveness-to-influence subdimension to correlate positively with general appearance concerns (H2). This hypothesis was not supported either, as the relationship we found between the two was close to zero. This also led us to reject our last hypothesis according to which the receptiveness to influence subdimension mediates the relationship between general self-construal and appearance concerns (H3). A correlational pattern between interdependent self-construal, receptiveness to influence, and anxious experiences of beauty led us to conduct additional analyses with anxious experience as the outcome. These analyses further confirmed the limited role of receptiveness to influence in explaining the link between interdependence and appearance concerns, showing that the subdimension does not mediate the relationship between general interdependent self-construal and anxious experiences of beauty concerns.

Despite this lack of support for our main hypotheses, follow-up analyses revealed that the self-construal dimension of harmony consistently predicted all three appearance concerns measures and also outpredicted the more general interdependent self-construal dimension. This suggests that this subdimension offers an alternative explanation of why general interdependent self-construal may facilitate appearance concerns. A less central but nonetheless interesting intervention was our exploration of the distinction between secure and

anxious experiences of beauty concerns and the observation that those experiences were hardly correlated. Although this points to the possibility that caring about one's appearance can be associated with ambivalent feelings, where an individual may simultaneously experience both feelings of security and insecurity, or varying degrees of each, the harmony subdimension of self-construal was positively related to all three outcome measures, suggesting an underlying psychological explanation. We discuss these key findings in more detail below in terms of their interpretation and implications.

Interpretations of the Findings

As reflected by the lack of support for our main hypotheses, our study did not replicate Madan et al.'s (2018) findings for our measure of appearance concerns. This difference in findings between studies can likely be attributed to differences in terms of measurement. Madan et al. (2018) assessed appearance concerns by relying solely on a specific behavior (i.e., the willingness to purchase a beauty product after exposure to an advertisement). This measure does not fully capture the broader concept of appearance concerns as conceptualized in our study, which views it as a cognitive variable that reflects the general attention individuals allocate to their physical appearance in their daily lives (Brown et al., 1990). We believe that their measure may actually better capture participants' receptiveness to external influences rather than appearance concerns because the context of their study included advertisements reflecting exactly such external influence. In our view, this might explain why Madan et al. (2018) found a strong correlation between participants' willingness to buy the product and interdependent self-construal in their study as such willingness might be an expression of receptivity to influence (rather than of appearance concern). As such, these findings may refine rather than contradict Madan et al.'s (2018) findings, pointing to the conditions under which their conclusions hold: receptiveness to influence may shape

participants' immediate decisions in response to a beauty advertisement, but it does not necessarily extend to the cognitive level of attention individuals allocate to their appearance in daily life, or to the extent to which this sustained attention to appearance fosters either security or anxiety in individuals.

Nevertheless, an even more significant difference between the two studies lies in self-construal measurement. Madan et al. (2018) used a traditional self-construal scale, which does not distinguish between a general overarching self-construal and its specific subdimensions. Since they included items that likely tap into subdimensions in their general scale, the correlation they found between self-construal and their participants' willingness to buy the beauty product may reflect a correlation driven by specific subdimensions rather than a general self-construal construct. For example, items included in their self-construal scale, such as "It is important to me to respect decisions made by the group," appear closely related to the harmony subdimension, while the rest of their items appear to reflect the self-containment versus connection to others subdimension (Vignoles et al., 2016). Thus, it is doubtful whether their general measure is actually so general.

However, the same critique may apply to our own study. Therefore, the lack of correlation in our study may not imply that general self-construal is irrelevant to appearance concerns. Rather, it highlights the limited explanatory power of an overarching self-construal measure compared to its specific subdimensions (in our study, particularly harmony). This suggests that participants' general self-construal or a general susceptibility to beauty ideals alone may not fully explain the extent of their appearance-related behaviors or the overall attention they devoted to their appearance. Instead, it was better explained by the harmony aspect of their self-construal.

This raises the question of why the harmony dimension emerged as the most relevant and consistent predictor of appearance concerns in our study, correlating significantly and positively with all three outcomes -general appearance concerns, as well as both secure and anxious beauty concerns experiences (and in fact with particularly strong ties to secure experiences). We believe these findings suggest that a broader desire for harmony with the group (i.e., the inclination to value group cohesion and relationships; Vignoles et al., 2016), rather than susceptibility to external influence or a desire for similarity, may better explain why individuals conform to beauty ideals—regardless of whether this concern is positive, negative, or reflects general attention to appearance.

Indeed, based on Vignoles et al.'s (2016) scale items and those included in our study (i.e., "It is important to me that I respect decisions made by my group" and "It is important to maintain harmony within my group"), harmony can be understood as the emphasis placed on staying in cohesion with the group by aligning with its norms and practices, while also avoiding conflict. Regarding appearance concerns, these norms and practices could refer to the tacit and shared agreement that exists among group members about presentation norms, such as how one should present oneself in a specific situation (e.g., the shared idea that one should dress formally for a job interview) or strive to look like (e.g., beauty ideals that are shared inside a same group). Since these ideals remain implicit, they create uncertainty (i.e., one can never be sure of fitting them), reinforcing the need to align and be in harmony with the group to ease this discomfort (Hogg, 2000). Therefore, it may not be so much receptiveness to external norms in general, but rather a desire to align to group norms to ensure cohesion and harmony that explains why self-construal might be linked to appearance concerns.

This explanation appears to be supported by the positive correlations we found between harmony and *both* secure and anxious experiences of beauty concern, suggesting that the pursuit of harmony and cohesion within the group can lead to both positive and negative psychological outcomes regarding one's appearance. On the positive side, sharing similar ideas with your group about how one should look in a specific context may foster harmony and a sense of insurance because it allows us to function effectively in a social setting (e.g., I know how to dress to go to a job interview and this give me a sense of adequacy and confidence). On the negative side, deviations from these presentation norms may create discomfort and insecurity (e.g., the uncomfortable feeling one might experience when feeling underdressed or overdressed for a social event). Although speculative at this point, this logic does not stop at contextual dress code but can also be extended to beauty ideals more generally: Knowing that I have physical traits that the group values as beautiful may boost my confidence while knowing that I do not have them may foster insecurity. This is because I believe that the group values or devalues these traits that, in turn it can either foster or undermine my sense of security. However, these are all assumptions about the group's ideals, which I can never be certain about, creating uncertainty and an even stronger need to be in cohesion with the group. In this sense, although in a different way than anticipated, our study supported the idea that specific subdimensions of self-construal are more relevant than general self-construal in understanding appearance-related concerns, namely harmony rather than receptiveness to influence.

Implications

Although mostly explorative, the current findings have theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the lack of support for our main hypotheses, combined with the significant findings for harmony, suggests that the relationship between interdependent self-

construal and appearance concerns is more nuanced than previously assumed (Madan et al., 2018). Specifically, these findings highlight the relevance of examining specific subdimensions of self-construal (in particular harmony) when investigating appearance concerns as they offer a more precise and detailed understanding of its underlying psychological mechanisms compared to broader constructs like general interdependent self-construal. This provides additional evidence in favor of Vignoles et al.'s (2016) subdimensional approach.

Although less central to our findings, the distinction we found between secure and anxious experiences of beauty concerns can also be used in future theorizing and research on appearance concerns to identify the determinants of positive and negative experiences of appearance concerns, respectively to inform further intervention

Finally, although our correlational findings reflect individual differences that may be difficult to change, they can be used to guide future interventions, which brings us to the practical implications of our findings. The role of self-construal, particularly harmony, in shaping appearance suggests that interventions should consider the social significance of appearance concerns rather than focusing solely on individual factors. As such, interventions should address how appearance concerns relate to an internalized need to maintain cohesion within one's social group and the potential anxious and maladaptive experiences that can arise from it. This includes individual's beliefs about the social implications of their appearance, beliefs about what others expect or judge about their looks, and the presumed link between appearance and social acceptance, which we expect, according to our findings, to strongly impact one's self-image. Such maladaptive beliefs can be addressed notably through cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), a therapeutic approach designed to help individuals identify, challenge, and reframe maladaptive beliefs (Beck, 2020).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Our study is the first and only study to date to investigate the role of the subdimension of harmony in appearance concerns. This is a strength but also a limitation, as further research is necessary to determine whether the role of this subdimension of self-construal in appearance concerns can be replicated and whether these findings hold across different contexts and samples. Specifically, although harmony was most strongly correlated with a secure experience of beauty, it was also linked to insecurity, suggesting that its role in psychological outcomes related to appearance is complex and in need of further study. Indeed, future research can seek to clarify the specific circumstances under which harmony can be either protective or detrimental to, for example, an individual's self-esteem.

Another important limitation concerns the self-containment versus connection-to-others subdimension, which was initially included in our study but later dismissed due to the lack of robustness of its scale. The role of this subdimension still needs to be investigated in future studies, in particular, because most of the items in Madan et al.'s (2018) self-construal scale (which correlated with willingness to buy beauty products) appear to align with this subdimension. Specifically, three out of the four items reflect a focus on relationships over personal achievements, including "I often feel that my relationships with others are more important than my own accomplishments", "My happiness depends on the happiness of those around me," and "I will sacrifice my self-interest for the benefit of the group I am in." Future studies should include a measure of this subdimension of self-construal.

Finally, although we aimed for a diverse sample, our study included predominantly women (75.1%). This may limit the generalizability of our findings (especially to men). Harmony encourages individuals to align their actions with others' beliefs and expectations (Vignoles et al., 2016). However, evidence suggests that societal expectations regarding

appearance often differ between women and men, with women typically facing higher standards in many cultures (Halim et al., 2024; Huang et al., 2021). Future research could benefit from replicating this study with a more balanced gender sample to enable a direct comparison or from focusing specifically on men to explore whether the relationship between harmony and appearance concerns, as found in the current study, holds for men's appearance concerns.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides nuanced insights into the previously suggested relationship between interdependent self-construal and appearance concerns, as explained by conformity to norms (Madan et al., 2018). Our findings did not support these hypotheses but revealed an alternative subdimension of self-construal to matter more: seeking harmony. These findings emphasize the need for a more precise framework for explaining appearance concerns. Specifically, they highlight the importance of investigating distinct subdimensions of self-construal over a general measure. Adopting this refined approach offers a more comprehensive understanding of how self-construal influences appearance-related behaviors and opens pathways for more targeted and effective interventions

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Appendix

Scales items

Construct	Code	Question wording
General independent self-construal	IND S-C	In general, I see myself as separate from others
General dependent self-construal	INTER S-C	In general, I see myself as dependent on others.
Self-direction versus receptiveness to influence	SDvsRTI1	Being able to take care of myself is a primary concern for me.*
	SDvsRTI2	I should decide my future on my own.
	SDvsRTI3	Other people's wishes have an important influence on the choices I make.
	SDvsRTI4	I would sacrifice an activity that I enjoy very much if my family did not approve of it.
	SDvsRTI5	Many aspects of my life have already been planned out for me by other people.
Difference versus similarity	DvsS1	Being a unique individual is important to me.
	DvsS2	I enjoy being unique and different from others in many ways.
	DvsS3	Being different from others makes me uncomfortable
	DvsS4	I avoid standing out among my friends.
(Self-expression versus) harmony	SEvsH1	It is important to me that I respect decisions made by my groups.
	SEvsH2	It is important to maintain harmony within my groupe.
	SEvsH3	I prefer to be direct and forthright when discussing with people.*
	SEvsH4	I often do « my own thing ».*
Self-containment versus connection to others	SCvsCTO1	I consider my happiness separate from the happiness of my friends and family. •
	SCvsCTO2	It is important for me to be accepted member of my family as well as my group of friends.*
	SCvsCTO3	I usually feel a strong sense of pride when someone in my family has an important accomplishment.*
	SCvsCTO4	My personal accomplishments are more important than maintaining my social relationships.*

Scales items

Anxious experience of beauty concerns	IEB1	If I don't feel like I look good, this can really ruin my day.
	IEB2	I often feel stressed out when I feel I need to take care of my appearance.
	IEB3	I often find myself worrying about how I look.
Secure experience of beauty concerns	SEB1	After taking care of my appearance, I feel rather empowered.
	SEB2	After taking care of my appearance, I feel more ready to face the day.
	SEB3	I think that taking care of my appearance brings positive outcomes in my life.

Note: *deleted items

A thesis is an aptitude test for students. The approval of the thesis is proof that the student has sufficient research and reporting skills to graduate, but does not guarantee the quality of the research and the results of the research as such, and the thesis is therefore not necessarily suitable to be used as an academic source to refer to. If you would like to know more about the research discussed in this thesis and any publications based on it, to which you could refer, please contact the supervisor mentioned.