The Media's Effect on Women's Body Image Satisfaction

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By

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Capstone Approval Page

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The Media's Effect on Women's Body Image Satisfaction

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This study employed a repeated measures t-test to evaluate the effect of exposure to media images of models on women’s body image satisfaction. Forty college women participated in the study. Their body image satisfaction was measured in a two-part survey with the first part given before viewing the media images and the second part given immediately after viewing the media images. No significant change in body satisfaction for the study participants was found before and after viewing the media image. These findings failed to support the idea that exposure to idealized media images impacts women’s body satisfaction in a negative way. Limitations of the study are discussed.
Introduction

The media is all around us, embedded into every facet of our lives. In today's world, you can't turn a corner without seeing some type of advertisement for a product, movie, television show, awards ceremony, etc. The media sends many messages to consumers including what is the ideal body image. Many studies have been done on the media's effect on body image satisfaction. Some have measured the short-term and one was found that measured the long-term effects the media has on body image satisfaction as well as mood. Internalization of the thin ideal and the social comparison theory have been used as frameworks for understanding the relationship between idealized media images and body satisfaction. The research in this study will focus on the short-term effects of media on college-aged women.

The Related Literature

Internalization of the Thin Ideal

Continuous exposure to media images alters women's perceptions of what the average body dimensions of a woman should be. This repeated exposure promotes an internalization of an idealized thin image (Stice, Ziemba, Margolis, & Flick, 1996). An internalization of an idealized thin body image is concerning. Internalization of the thin ideal means that women believe that the thin bodies they see on television or in print advertising is what their bodies should look like. Therefore, they strive to attain that ideal, which is quite literally impossible to achieve for most women. Some women may take tremendous measures to achieve their goals such as extreme dieting and disordered eating practices.

A study conducted by Heinberg and Thompson (1995) showed 10-minute videotapes of commercials to college females that either contained stimuli emphasizing societal ideals of
thinness and attractiveness or contained neutral, non-appearance related images. Higher levels of depression, anger, weight dissatisfaction, and overall appearance dissatisfaction were found for the women who viewed the tape showing thin ideals (Heinberg & Thompson 1995). These findings suggest that idealized images of women used in the media have a detrimental effect on women.

**Social Comparison Theory**

Social comparison theory (Festinger 1954) offers insight regarding the effects idealized media images have on consumers. The social comparison theory says that individuals are constantly comparing themselves to others to evaluate themselves. If an individual feels that others are superior to them, they will experience a decrease in body image satisfaction. If an individual feels that others are inferior to them, they will experience an increase in body image satisfaction (Festinger 1954). This directly correlates with media images because many young women compare themselves to the models they see in print advertisements and on television. Bower (2001), through the use of Festinger's theory as a framework, found that when college-aged women compared themselves with idealized images in advertising, they demonstrated an increase in negative feelings, such as anger and depression. Bower found this through showing female research subjects images of idealized media images of women and asking them about their mood both before and after viewing. Subsequently, for the present research, the female participants were expected to show a decrease in body image satisfaction after viewing idealized media images of women.

**Effects of Media Images on Mood and Body Image**
In recent years there has been concern for the effects the media has on young women’s body image. Accordingly, many studies have been performed that seek to understand the effects of media images on mood and body image. Jung (2006) used 12 images, selected through a rating system by female participants, as stimuli to show to study participants. The study was done in two sessions spaced four weeks apart. Participants were asked questions about body image and mood in the first session. Four weeks later, participants returned. They were shown the 12 images again and then asked the same questions on mood and body image that were asked during the first session. Findings showed that exposure to media images of the western cultural idea of beauty negatively affected participants’ moods. A noteworthy relationship between appearance self-schema and body image and mood existed. Women who did not place great importance on appearance did not have decreased body image satisfaction after viewing the images. However, exposure to the media images decreased positive mood and increased feelings of depression and anxiety for most subjects. (Jung 2006).

Another study performed exposed college women to photographs of thin models from *Cosmopolitan* and *Vogue*. Women exposed to these photos reported significantly higher levels of private body self-consciousness (the self-conscious feelings about their bodies that women feel, but usually keep to themselves) and anxiety than before viewing the photos (Kolodner, 1997). Stice and Shaw (1994) exposed women to 12 photographs of models taken from popular women’s magazines for three minutes. This led to temporary increases in depression, stress, guilt, shame, insecurity, and body image dissatisfaction among the participants in the experimental group. Those in the control group who viewed photos of average sized models did not demonstrate the same increases of these traits. In short, research findings indicate that there
is a negative correlation between exposure to idealized media images and body image satisfaction and mood over the short-term.

Stice, Spangler, and Agras (2001) sought to discover whether exposure to media images had a long-term effect on body image satisfaction. The researchers gave out magazine subscriptions to Seventeen in a raffle. Two hundred and nineteen adolescent females between the ages of 13 and 17 were given a seven page survey consisting of a variety of questions to measure how much time was spent reading the magazine, body mass index information, pressure the participants were under to be thin, the perceived social support the participants had, internalization of the thin ideal, body dissatisfaction, dieting, depression, and whether or not the participants had an eating disorder to complete twice, once after having the subscription for 10 months, and again after 20 months. Although the findings showed that the magazine subscriptions exposed participants to media images more, there was no strong evidence showing that it decreased their overall body satisfaction.

Current research generally supports the idea that exposure to media images of “idealized” models may lead to a decrease in body image satisfaction for young women from adolescent age to college age.

Hypothesis

Based on the literature reviewed, the hypothesis for this study was as follows:

\( H_a: \) Participants will report lower levels of body satisfaction after having viewed idealized media images of women than they did prior to viewing the images.
Method

Sample Selection

Questionnaires were distributed to students in a university undergraduate course in fashion merchandising, which was open to all majors. Participation was voluntary. Each student was given a consent form that guaranteed anonymity and gave them contact information if they had any questions. This form also allowed participants to stop participation at any time while taking the questionnaire. Participants were told verbally that the survey was about college student’s interest in fashion and body image. Participants were also told that there would be a slide show of images and that they were to stop and wait to continue when they got to the slide show component of the survey.

Selection of Media Images

Images were chosen on the basis of the American ideal of beauty for women including physical features such as slenderness, tall height, and long hair. Because mainstream media sources usually use European American models, all of the models in the four selected images were Caucasian (Jung 2006). All of the images showed full-length views of the models taken from popular retailer’s websites.

Instrument and Procedure

This study was designed to measure the effects of exposure to media images on body image satisfaction. Participants were given a two-part survey. The first part of the survey was entitled Fashion Interest and Satisfaction with One’s Own Appearance. Participants were asked to respond to questionnaire items using a scantron form. The questionnaire consisted of a distinct set of questions measuring body image satisfaction that were asked in both the first and second
parts of the questionnaire. Other questions were mixed throughout the survey to camouflage the body image satisfaction focus of the study. The purpose of the first part of the survey was to measure body image satisfaction of participants prior to viewing the media images. To measure body image satisfaction, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which statements such as “I like my body,” and “I feel confident about my physical appearance when in a social setting” described themselves using a 5-point Likert scale with response choices ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”.

In addition, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which Likert-scaled statements on fashion interest described themselves (e.g., “Staying up-to-date on fashion trends is important to me”). Again, response choices for the 5-point scale included strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree. Multiple-choice questions, such as “In your estimation, what is the approximate dollar value per month that you spend on apparel and related accessories (e.g., socks, purses, backpacks, cosmetics, jewelry, etc.)?,” with answer choices ranging from “less than $100” to “greater than $500,” were also included. These fashion interest questions were used for the sole purpose of distracting the participants from the body image focus of the questionnaire, and the fact that the same items would appear again in the second part of the questionnaire.

For the second part of the survey, participants were shown the four media images of fashion models. Participants were asked to rate how consistent the physical appearance of each woman pictured was with the American ideal of beauty in women. This was asked to ensure the participants took a close look at the images as well as to measure whether they felt that the women embodied the American ideal.
After participants viewed the four images, they were asked the same body image satisfaction questions that appeared in the first part of the survey. This was done in order to determine if a negative change in body image satisfaction occurred immediately after viewing the images. For this part of the questionnaire, the fashion interest items that appeared in the first part were absent.

Finally, the last piece of the questionnaire was a qualitative analysis to determine what physical characteristics participants felt characterized the American ideal in feminine beauty. Participants were asked to list three to five characteristics associated with the American “ideal” in feminine beauty. This was asked in order to evaluate whether the images selected were in line with the ideal feminine beauty standard and to determine what “ideal” participants were comparing themselves against in accordance with the social comparison theory. Below is a chart detailing the findings of this question:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics Associated with the American Ideal in Feminine Beauty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Eyes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stylish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Breasts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Butt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blonde</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flawless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pretty Smile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Fashion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense Beauty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beauty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perfect Skin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long hair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skinny</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Analysis

Participants

A sample of 40 college women attending Northern Illinois University participated in the study. These women ranged in age from 18 – 21 years and older. All participants volunteered with no incentive. The chart below shows a further breakdown of the sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Females 40</td>
<td>Under 18</td>
<td>Single 39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males 1</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2 Married 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21+</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to analyze the results of the data collected, a repeated measures t-test was used in order to determine whether or not any change occurred between the body image scores of participants before viewing the media images and their scores after viewing the media images. The mean of the differences between the pretest and posttest responses was -.24. This shows that the average difference in body image scores for participants was -.24, meaning that, overall, the sample showed a slight decrease in body image satisfaction after viewing the media images. The test statistic was .86 and the critical region was determined to be 1.68 for a one-tailed t-test with an alpha level of .05.
Because the test statistic (.86) did not fall into the critical region (1.68), it was concluded that there was no significant change in body image satisfaction. Therefore, the alternate hypothesis that was developed prior to the data collection failed to be supported by the data.

Discussion and Implications

The findings of the present study were inconsistent with several findings reported in previous research examining the effect of idealized media images on women. One of the possible reasons that the alternative hypothesis failed to be supported could be due to limitations related to the procedures used. Participants were asked the two sets of body image questions within a short space of time; perhaps if there had been a time lapse between the two parts of the survey, results would have been different as participants would have been less aware of the same questions about body satisfaction being asked a second time.

The lack of a significant decrease in body image satisfaction after the participants viewed the media images may also suggest that the media may not have as strong of an effect on young women as it has in the past. This may mean that young women are more satisfied with their physical appearances. If this is the case, it may be indicative of media images having a decreasing impact on body satisfaction. Additional research is needed to verify this possibility.
References


