

Media Ideals... Unattainable to Most Females

Jennifer Smith and Amber Taylor

Undergraduate Students, Human Development and Family Studies

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Abstract

The images of females displayed in the media today are thinner than the images of male, thinner than media images of females in the past, than the actual female population, and than the criteria for anorexia (Schooler, Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2004). This study investigated the stereotypical representations of adult females in mass media. It was hypothesized that exposure to mass media containing idealistic representations of the female body would be associated with less favorable body image evaluation among adult females. Results indicated a strong need for awareness and education regarding media images that carry forth ideas of such gender stereotypes throughout society. All participants reported having a higher level of body image dissatisfaction after viewing the mass media's ideal, which supported the hypothesis. Implications for practitioners indicate that awareness of media ideals and perceived body image versus the average healthy body needs to be more inclusive throughout a female's life.

Introduction

Females often aspire to be perfect when it comes to their physical appearance, and the perfect ideal is often described as tall, extremely thin, and blond (Schooler et al., 2004). Unfortunately, this ideal is unattainable to the vast majority of females, contributing to low self-esteem and body image. Feminist Theory states that awareness and removal of blinders is a continuous process rather than a one time step (Boss, Doherty, LaRossa, Schumm, & Steinmetz, 1993). Females have been marginalized by everyday experiences within society. The media heavily portrays females in stereotypical and "idealized" ways in regards to body image, and it has a profound impact on the female society. Media pressures to be thin influences females to have negative feelings about their appearance. The influence of media is the strongest predictor of overall body satisfaction in college females.

Research indicates that the ideal female body, as represented by media images, is currently between 13% and 19% below expected weight for females (Engeln-Maddox, 2005). Stereotypical representations of the female body viewed in the media leads to a negatively perceived body image among females. For the purpose of this study, stereotypical representation refers to inappropriate, repetitive acts that are frequently displayed within the media or through group interactions (Turnbull, Turnbull, Shank, & Leal, 1999). Perceived body image refers to the awareness and perception of one's own body in relation to both appearance and function based on social norms (Champion & Furnham, 1999). Literature on mass media's stereotypical representations and the affects it has on female body image were examined.

Literature Review

In the process of researching the impact mass media has on the female body image through idealist depictions and imagery, it is important to assess studies that have looked in-depth at this population and the impact media has on many generations of males, females and children. After review, several articles regarding the negative impacts media has on female adolescent body image were found, but little research regarding adult females. Most research reviewed was from more recent years, suggesting that this issue has become more prevalent recently, possibly due to the increasing availability of mass media. In one study researchers distributed 2,500 questionnaires to students enrolled in eight high schools in the province of Nova Scotia, Canada. Body dissatisfaction typically is characterized as an issue faced predominantly by the female population. The case has been made that exposure to magazines and television programs containing idealistic body imagery as well as frequency of self-comparison to fashion models is becoming a widespread phenomena (Green & Pritchard, 2003). Indeed, the images of females displayed in the media today are thinner than the images of males, thinner than media images of females in the past, actual female population, and the criteria for anorexia (Schooler et al., 2004). Because few females can meet the beauty standards created by this ideal, dissatisfaction with one's own appearance is a likely outcome of this comparison process.

Based on the literature, mass media has impacted adult female's beliefs of themselves in regards to their body image. "Body image may be conceptualized as a multidimensional construct that represents how individuals think, feel, and behave with regard to their own physical attributes" (Morrison, Kalin & Morrison, 2004). The studies investigated discussed the measures taken by females to look like the "ideal" woman. The literature compared male and female adolescents in terms of physical traits including male- muscular, female- thinness, white females to females of color, and have further compared thinness of today to thinness of years past.

The "gap" this study intends to fill is that of the mass media's influence on adult female's body image. Previous researchers and past studies have not looked at adult females exclusively with regards to the media's stereotypical representations and perceived body image. Past studies have concentrated on the effects media has on female adolescents and adult males versus adult females, but not on how the media affects adult females (Engeln-Maddox, 2005). This research will contribute to the family social science by furthering its understanding of how the mass media's representations of the idealistic female affect adult females cognitively through their perceived body image.

Theoretical Framework

The theory used in this study was the Feminist Theory (Boss et al., 1993). Feminist Theory emerged as a result of political movements to end female's subordination with families as well as in other institutions, beginning in the late nineteenth century. Feminist theory suggests that the concept of cultural gender, defined as all of the learned and cultural phenomena loosely associated with biological gender, is socially constructed. Traditionally, females have been defined ideologically by cultural norms and gender. According to Feminist Theory, cultural or symbolic notions of gender determine what it means to be a male versus a female in a specific sociocultural context. Feminist Theory also suggests that sexuality is symbolically charged, deeply embedded in social institutions. It further suggests that it is culture that constructs the separated sex categories, "male and female" and gendered notions like "masculinity and femininity."

As applied to our study, this theory would predict that the mass media would have a negative impact on female college students, including how they view themselves in comparison to the stereotypical and idealistic images marketed within all aspects of the mass media. Based on Feminist Theory, it is predicted that the sample of female college students will exhibit attitudes based on socially constructed gender roles and stereotypes portrayed in the mass media, resulting in negative outcomes concerning body image. This prediction is based on the Feminist idea that gender is organized and symbolized. Idealized constructions of “masculine” and “feminine” have varied and changed over time. Within the Feminist Theory it discusses that family and gender are assembled by society and taught throughout life.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to examine the research question: What is the relationship between exposure to mass media’s stereotypical representations of women and how it influences the female student in relation to their perceived body image?

Methods

Participants

The site of this study was at a small Midwestern university. The participants were 63 female undergraduate students who were currently enrolled in a Human Development and Family Studies course. Of these 63 participants, 47 were between the ages of 18-21, 15 between the ages 22-25, and there was one participant in the 30+ age bracket. The academic status of the participants consisted of 17 sophomores, 25 juniors, and 21 seniors.

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to identify the adult female sample population’s opinions and then use the data to generalize about a larger population of similar students on campus. The survey design type used was a cross-sectional study design in that it was used to capture adult female opinions from a cross section of the population at one point in time. The form of data collection was self-administered questionnaires. The rationale for using this method is that it was the most efficient method to gather data directly on campus due to the rapid nature of our research course; it was convenient, low cost, and allowed for quick return of data from participants. The study used a non-random probability sample design. Quota sampling was selected from a convenient location convenient, which consisted of three classrooms within the Home Economics building on the campus. The ethical protection of human subjects was provided by completing the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (IRB) training; our study was approved by the IRB.

Data Collection Instrument

A survey was designed to measure the affects mass media has on adult female body image. The survey included a cover letter with an implied consent form which incorporated a description of the study, definitions of any terms not commonly known, risks and benefits, time commitment, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and contact information of the research team and the supervisor as well as the instructions for completing the survey.

The survey consisted of three demographic questions relating to age, gender and academic status that were used as a basis to analyze the data. Participants were then given five close-ended statements based on a 5-point Likert scale which measured the intensity of the

respondents' opinions from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). Questions were formed by the literature and theory regarding how one might describe themselves in relation to what is viewed in the media.

The survey instrument has both face and content validity. The statements addressed a broad range of issues regarding stereotypical depictions of females in the mass media and the subsequent effects. To increase validity, the survey was piloted on four female undergraduate students who met the criteria of our study. Feedback indicated that the survey was clear and ready for further circulation.

Procedure

To collect the data we approached two professors on campus between October 24, 2006 and November 1, 2006 who taught classes in the major Human Development and Family Studies; we discussed our need to acquire volunteers for the survey. Our probability quota sampling design gave us the opportunity to survey all female undergraduate students within our proximity. After permission was granted, we began our sampling by entering each classroom and handing out surveys to all members of the class. We then introduced ourselves and our project and explained that we were only looking for female's input regarding this issue, but we would take the male perspective into account for our own knowledge and perhaps future research. It was stressed that all participants had to be 18 years or older to partake in the survey. Next, we read aloud the implied consent form as the students followed along, focusing on all vital information necessary to gather volunteers. We stated that this survey was completely voluntary and would only take about 5 minutes of their time. Before exiting the room willing participants were asked to place all finished surveys inside a manila envelope in front of the classroom. Both researchers and all professors exited the rooms while the participants completed the surveys to eliminate any distractions and pressures. After all participants had left, we reentered the room to collect the completed surveys that had been securely sealed. All the surveys were then placed in a locked filing cabinet until data analysis.

Data Analysis Plan

The data was first "cleaned" and checked for missing data. The "cleaned" surveys were then "coded" using acronyms for each variable. The first three questions on the survey were demographic questions: academic status, gender and age. Each survey statement was a dependent variable and given an acronym name: To determine if body image dissatisfaction is common among college females (*COM*), if college females want to look like the people they see in the media (*WNT*), if college females judge their own attractiveness based on comparing themselves to images in the media (*JDG*), if they frequently dwell on negatives thoughts about their own body (*DWL*), and if they want to change something about their bodies after viewing females in the media (*CHG*). To analyze the data, the data-analyzing computer program called Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used. The individual was used as our level of analysis. The data analysis included frequencies and a reliability analysis: Chronbach's Alpha.

Results

All variables were subjected to frequency distribution analysis. Results indicated that there was no missing data. The Cronbach's Alpha measure of reliability in our analysis was .849.

Table 1

Frequencies

Variable	<i>SD</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>SA</i>	Total
COM	0.0%	5.0%	11.0%	41.0%	43.0%	100.0%
WNT	0.0%	9.0%	13.0%	54.0%	24.0%	100.0%
JDG	0.0%	6.0%	21.0%	48.0%	25.0%	100.0%
DWL	0.0%	13.0%	16.0%	44.0%	27.0%	100.0%
CHG	1.0%	8.0%	10.0%	48.0%	33.0%	100.0%

Note. (COM)=Body image dissatisfaction is common among college females; (WNT)=College females want to look like the people they see in movies, television shows and music videos; (JDG)=College females judge their own attractiveness based on comparing themselves with what they see in the media; (DWL)=College females frequently dwell on negative thoughts about their own appearance after viewing other females in the media; (CHG)=College females want to change something about their bodies after viewing other females in the media.

Discussion

Survey results strongly supported the hypothesis that exposure to mass media containing idealistic representations of the female body was associated with less favorable body image evaluation among adult females. Results showed that the majority of respondents strongly agreed that body image dissatisfaction is common among college females, which is evident in the literature as well (Engeln-Maddox, 2005). Most respondents strongly agreed that college females want to look like the people they see on movies, television shows, and music videos (Green & Pritchard, 2003). The majority of females desire a thinner physique, the typed viewed in the media on a daily basis. Seventy-three percent of participants agreed that college female's judge their own attractiveness based on comparing themselves with what they see in the media (Schooler et al., 2004). Mass media is believed to play an important role in perpetuating this ultra thin ideal for females. According to Morrison et al. (2004), females who believe fashion magazines are important sources of beauty and fitness information were more likely to dwell on negative aspects of their appearance. This finding was strongly associated with the majority of respondents. The final survey statements concluded that the vast majority of participants strongly agreed that college females want to change something about their bodies after viewing other females in the media; this too is highlighted in the literature (Engeln-Maddox, 2005).

The findings strongly relate to the Feminist Theory in that it suggests that sexuality is symbolically charged and deeply embedded in social institutions, which is evident in all the survey statements. In other words, it is impossible to avoid comparing oneself to the images repeatedly bombarded with. Based on Feminist Theory, our sample group of female college students displayed attitudes that are based on socially constructed gender roles and stereotypes portrayed in the mass media (Boss et al., 1993).

Interestingly, as we examined the qualitative comments in relation to the survey statements and hypothesis, respondents revealed they not only evaluate themselves with images in the

media, but in opposition with their peers as well. Some of the adult females even carried the notion that they must conform to what males find attractive based on the imagery in the media.

Limitations

Some limitations were evident within our study. There was a lack of diversity within the adult female population, not only in ethnic groups, but within age groups as well. A more representative sample would have included equal numbers of each age group. Being that adult females were surveyed, we should have expanded our survey to include the faculty and staff of the University.

Implications for Practitioners

The results showed that there is a need to educate society regarding the devastating effects the mass media has on females alike. It is our hope that the results from this study will be used by the college community as a whole. It is important for females to realize that they should not feel obligated to conform to the stereotypical and idealistic ways set forth in the media. The trend in today's society is to view females in idealistic ways, encouraging them to believe they must conform to these images in order to feel worthy. This issue can be discussed through the campus counseling center, through interactions with advisors and RA's, and dispersed through the college curriculum. Faculty and staff can use the information from this study to inform students and surrounding communities of the hidden messages within the mass media, how females are negatively affected by these stereotypical depictions of the ideal female body that for most is unattainable.

It is important to provide female students with information that focuses on positive self identity, self-esteem and body image, especially at a time when they are exploring the world and figuring out who they truly are as a person. The Human Development and Family Studies major houses classes that discuss such topics; making some of these courses required for graduation would promote a stable starting point for females as they attempt to uncover the hidden agendas of the mass media. As family scholars, through education and counseling; we can address issues to construct a more realistic and healthy self-image for female which will in turn strengthen future generations.

Implications for Future Research

For future research we would propose looking at how peer groups influence one another concerning body image issues. We would also suggest incorporating males into a future study regarding media and body image, because they too are impacted by the stereotypical images embedded in the media

Conclusion

This study helped to fill in a small gap within the Family Social Science research by helping to uncover some devastating information regarding the feminine ideal that is embedded so deeply within the mass media that consumes society and sets standards. Overall, participants reported having a higher level of body image dissatisfaction after viewing the mass media's ideal. This research is significant to the field of Family Studies because it is a community wide issue that affects not only the individual, but the family system.

This ideal media standard can lead to instability in the form of family disagreements, eating disorders, negative body image and daily disruptions. Results indicated a strong need for

awareness and education regarding media images that carry forth the ideas of such gender stereotypes throughout society. Television advertising is a large scale money making industry, and we hope that individuals recognize the ways television targets audiences for the simple purpose of creating an even bigger industry. With this awareness, we hope that people will become conscientious and rebel against the conformities and idealisms set forth by the mass media. The danger in not doing this could be detrimental to the approaching generations of females.

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