Idealism: Factors affecting the body image of college students

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Abstract

This research paper analyzes body image and the factors that affect it. First, it aims to discover if gender has an effect on body satisfaction. It also examines the extent the media influences an individual’s perspective on their body image and which forms of media have the most influence on individuals. Last, it analyzes what other factors, besides the media, influence body image. This study was completed over the course of a month. The entire student population at a small Midwestern university was sent a survey via e-mail. The first 100 responses were used. Overall, it was concluded that relationships with others and confidence effect body image. The media has a significant influence on an individual’s perspective on body image and females tend to be more prone to influence than males.

Key Words: Body satisfaction, body image, media
Review of Literature

‘When I survey this countless multitude of beings, shaped in each other’s likenesses, among whom nothing rises and nothing falls, the sight of such universal uniformity saddens and chills me, and I am tempted to regret that form of (aristocratic) society which has ceased to be…’

De Tocqueville - Democracy in America (as cited in Cullingford, 1984, p.vii)

Influence of the media

The term mass media, which became popular in the 1920’s, describes various mediums such as television and print that are used to deliver a message to a large audience.

Groesz, Levine, and Murnen (2002) state that, “The mass media has been argued to be the most powerful and influential sociocultural factor contributing to body dissatisfaction in Western society by being the strongest proponent of the thin standard of beauty” (as cited in Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2006, p. 1). Magazine articles were specifically highlighted by Field et al. (1999), “…Among pre-adolescent and adolescent girls…frequent readers of fashion magazines (e.g. Seventeen, Glamour) were more likely to report dieting to lose weight because of the magazine article and to want to lose weight because of pictures in magazines” (as cited in Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2006, p. 1). However, the study fails to point out the other reasons contributing to body dissatisfaction.

Social comparison theory

A common theme amongst researchers is the concept of social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954). Social comparison theory involves the evaluation of self, which is often accompanied with the comparison of self to others. Celebrities, both male and female, are often looked to as the “ideal.” Perhaps this is due to their level of success, which the public attributes, in part, to their physical appearance.

However, confidence levels, which have been influenced over the years by a number of different factors, can distort perception. Charles, Touyz, and Willinge’s study (2006) examines the relationship between how body-satisfied and body-dissatisfied individuals view the size of thin female celebrities. They discovered that body-dissatisfied females judged the female celebrities as thinner than they actually were, whereas body satisfied females judged the size of the celebrities more accurately. Those with low self-confidence may have the tendency to exaggerate what they see because their opinions of themselves are so low. The study fails to point out what factors affect low or high confidence levels.

Although there are other factors that contribute to a personal view of a healthy body image, previous research has been conducted that establishes a connection between the media and personal body image. However, there have been no explanations for why some people develop
an “unhealthy” body image and others do not, even though they are exposed to the same mediums.

Brumberg (2000) stated, “The current cultural models fail to explain why so many individuals do not develop the disease even though they have been exposed to the same cultural environment” (as cited in Alexander & Chambers, 2007, p.1).

Media literacy

One explanation to why some develop an “unhealthy” body image and others do not, even though they are exposed to the same medium, is media literacy. Being media literate is a learned quality. In order to become media literate one must be able to sort through the information given by the media and determine fact from fiction. Awareness regarding fallacies is crucial. Media literacy programs have been developed throughout the United States, focusing primarily on the elementary level. “These programs have been shown to increase an understanding of advertising (Roberts, Gibson, Moser, & Goldberg 1980; Feshback, Feshbach, & Cohen, 1982), alcohol advertising (Austin &Johnson, 1997), violence (Gunter, 1994), and racial and ethnic stereotypes (Vargas & DePssler 1998)” (as cited in Alexander & Chambers, 2007, p.2).

Bias in study

Alexander and Chambers experiment focuses on female college students. Their study found that 82.7% of the females that participated felt that their ideal body weight was lower than their current body weight (Alexander & Chambers, 2007). The feminist approach to their study may have influenced the results. The methods were not described in detail, causing one to doubt the accuracy of the findings. In addition, there was very little interpretation from the small amount of findings that existed.

Baird and Grieves’ study focused only on college males, with their subjects chosen from introductory psychology courses, therefore making it a non-probability sample (2006). The males on campus who do not take part in introductory psychology courses have no chance at taking part in this study, thus creating a bias and possible room for error. In addition, females cannot take part in the study. A bias(s) can exist in every experiment conducted, however steps can be taken to minimize and sometimes eliminate all bias from the study.

Age vs. Impact

The media impacts the lives of many, from young children to the elderly. Occasionally, it is assumed that young children do not understand the majority of the things they view on television, however a study conducted in the United States indicated that, “…The ability to interpret a sequence of shots does exist to some extent at younger ages” (as cited in Greenfield, 1984, p. 11). This shows that children may begin to paint a picture of a “healthy” body image at a very young age.
Prevention

There are ways to help or prevent the manifestation of an unhealthy body image, which could in-
turn lead to an eating disorder. Brumberg (2000) called this manifestation process the
“recruitment process” (as cited in Alexander & Chambers, 2007, p. 1, 2). Alexander and
Chambers discovered that, “…Even minimal exposure to a critical deconstruction of media
images has an impact on a student’s affective behavior, at least in the short-term” (2007, p. 7).

Internalization is one key concept that affects whether or not messages sent from the media will
be taken seriously or not. Choate (2005) found that when women are continuously exposed to the
thin ideal presented in the media, they are likely to internalize the cultural ideal as the standard
against which to compare themselves (as cited in Baird & Grieves, 2006, p. 2). The study was
very well described and the results concluded that men exposed to photographs of muscular men
had lower levels of body satisfaction following the exposure than prior to exposure.

Useful tactic

Many of the experiments and studies conducted on this topic, such as Scaravaggi, Tiggemann,
and Verri’s (2005) study on body image between Australian and Italian women, use the BMI
(Body Mass Index) to categorize their participants. This technique is an effective way to make
connections in research later on.

Importance

Gaps in the literature reviewed include that no study was completed involving both sexes, what
the other factors were that determined body satisfaction, and if confidence was one of the other
factors, what are the factors that affect confidence levels. This study will examine both female
and male subjects in order to attain an accurate assessment of the media’s influence on body
image for college students, unbiased to gender. In addition, it is important to remain impartial
and objective when determining why people create “unhealthy” body images. The blame cannot
fully be placed on the media if other sources are influential as well.

Body image obsession is an epidemic that is currently sweeping the nation, and even the world,
affecting children at a younger and younger age as time goes on. Studying topics, such as this,
are imperative to gain a better understanding of youth and constantly changing society. In order
to determine how to fix a problem, its cause must first be learned.

Due in part to the information that has been reviewed, the research questions for this study are:

RQ1: Does gender determine the level of body satisfaction or dissatisfaction?

RQ2: To what extent do the media influence body image?

RQ3: Which form of media has the greatest impact on influencing body image?
RQ4: What other factors influence body image?

Methods

To gain a better understanding of the media’s influence on body image a few different methods were used.

Subjects

A self-authored, thought provoking survey of 10 questions in length was distributed to the entire student population at a small Midwestern university. There are 1019 students currently enrolled at the university and they were all given an equal opportunity to participate, making it a probability sample, or one in which every member of the population has a chance to take part. It is also an example of a simple random sample, which is a type of probability sampling in which every member has an equal chance of selection.

Instrumentation & Procedures

The survey was created using the free version of the online survey tool Survey Monkey. Survey Monkey is an online survey making system that offers both a free edition and a deluxe edition that can be paid for. The features of the free version of the program include: survey creation, distribution, and tools to analyze it. Each e-mail had a link to the survey on Survey Monkey. This was done to ensure anonymity. No names were used or could be traced back to answers on the survey. The first 100 responses that came back were used.

It was decided that surveys would be distributed to the entire campus to eliminate as much bias as possible from the study. This method gives every student attending the university, either online or in person, an equal opportunity to participate in the study.

Survey Information

The survey included four closed-ended, two likert-scaled, two semantic differential, and two open-ended questions. The questions were mainly closed-ended to get direct responses that were easy to analyze. The open ended questions were used to get the personal opinions of the participants.

The responses were tallied for each question from the surveys that were returned and the corresponding percentages were given to each. The information was assessed and patterns and conclusions were drawn from the data.

Limitations

The current enrollment for the year is 1019 students. However, this includes not only students who attend the university in person, but also online students. This was one of the reasons that e-mail was utilized as the main distribution method, as it would eliminate all bias from choosing
participants. However, only the first 100 responses were used due to time restraints. Due to this limitation anyone who responded after the first 100 had no chance at being part of the study or having their opinions heard.

Results

The entire student population at a small Midwestern university was surveyed via the campus e-mail system. The online program Survey Monkey was used to ensure complete anonymity. Refer to Appendix A to view a copy of the survey that was distributed.

RQ1: Does gender determine the level of body satisfaction or dissatisfaction?

Of the 100 students who responded 68 of the respondents were female, whereas 32 of the respondents were males. Of the 100 respondents 77 admitted that the media has previously had an influence on their own personal body image, while 23 of the respondents said that the media did not have an effect on their personal body image.

RQ2: To what extent do the media influence body image?

Out of the respondents, 93% admitted to being influenced by the media, while seven percent said that they have never been influenced by the media. The media has influenced the personal body image of 77% of respondents, while 23% said the media does not influence their personal body image.

Respondents were then asked to rate the level of influence the media has on their opinions about their body image. The scale ranked from one to six, with one being the lowest level of influence, and six being the highest. Five percent of respondents selected one. Seventeen percent of respondents selected two. Twenty-five percent of respondents selected three. Thirty-three percent of respondents selected four. Fifteen percent of respondents selected five. Finally, five percent of respondents selected six.

RQ3: Which form of media has the greatest impact on influencing body image?

In question number four on the survey, respondents were asked to select all form (s) of media that impact their view on a healthy body image? Two people skipped the question. Of the ninety-eight people who responded to the question, 80.6% said that print, which includes magazine and newspaper articles, books, etc., impacted them the most. Visual ads in magazines and billboards were the most influential for 69.4% of those surveyed. Television and movies were the most influential at 86.7%. Radio had the lowest level of influence at 7.1%. Online content had 44.9% of the responses.

The last question of the survey asked how often they watched television or movies. Two percent said never. The most popular response was once in awhile (up to two hours a day) with 63%.
Thirty-one percent said that they watch television or movies often (3-5 hours a day). Four percent said that they always (6+ hours a day) watch television or movies.

**RQ4: What other factors influence body image?**

Question eight was an open-ended response question that asked the survey taker to describe other factors that influence their confidence level. Thirty eight respondents skipped the question, while 62 answered it.

Many answers were similar. The following is a list of the responses.

*Personal Attributes*
- Personal skills
- Personality
- Athletic ability
- Intelligence

*Outside Influence*
- Spirituality
- How the people around you look
- Media attention
- Meeting other people and comparing yourself to them
- People in life (family, friends, boyfriend/girlfriend, coaches, teachers, peers and other relationships) and their reactions or lack there of
- Role models
- Stress levels
- Environment

*Personal and Public Achievement*
- Success (such as high school/college sport success, being in the marines)
- Financial/income
- Doing well in school/work
- Number of friends one has

*Aesthetics*
- Factors such as clothing and hair
- Penis size
- Visuals
- Mirrors
- Age
Mental

- Body image
- Comments and remarks
- Stereotypes
- Each day affects them differently
- How men perceive women referring to sexuality
- Accepting who you are

The most popular response to this question was family and friends. It appeared 28 times in the responses.

Discussion & Conclusions

This research study aimed to answer four specific research questions. A survey was used to gather information and information from secondary sources was gathered to both support and discuss the topics at hand.

Gender

Alexander and Chambers conducted a study focusing primarily on females (2007), whereas Baird and Grieves conducted a study that focused on males (2006). This study focuses on both genders at the same time, and gives both genders an equal opportunity to participate.

The first research question asked whether or not gender influenced the level of body satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The majority of those who took the survey were female (68%) and 77% of the respondents admitted that the media did have an influence on their body image. Connections can be drawn between the high number of females and the high level of influence by the media.

Females are more susceptible to the influence of the media on their body image. Although the majority of men are less influenced than women, the body image of some men is influenced by the media.

This conclusion is slightly skewed because there were fewer men that took the survey than women. In order to get a more accurate gender-based reading half of the respondents should be female and half should be male.

Extent of media influence

Groesz, Levine, and Murnen (2002) state that, “The mass media has been argued to be the most powerful and influential sociocultural factor contributing to body dissatisfaction in Western society by being the strongest proponent of the thin standard of beauty” (as cited in Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2006, p. 1).
This study supported this statement by displaying the high level of influence the media has on individuals of either gender.

The majority of those surveyed, 93% stated that they have been influenced by the media. Seventy-seven percent stated that the media has influenced their body image. It is safe to assume and supported by the data that the media has a large impact on the public. It influences various aspects, particularly views of body image.

The extent of the media’s influence on body image was no surprise. The majority of the responses were in the middle of a six point scale. On the scale one was the least level of influence, while six was the highest. Thirty-three percent of those surveyed, although in the middle, leaned slightly to the higher level of influence and chose a four on the scale.

This shows that although people know they are influenced by the media, they are unsure as to what extent. They vote in the “safe” middle ground to avoid picking a distinct answer.

**Forms of Media**

None of the previous studies that were examined focused on what types of media were the most influential. This study examined various types of media and discovered which forms ranked the highest.

The form of media that has the greatest impact on an individual’s view of a healthy body according to the survey was television and movies with 86.7%. Print, which includes magazine and newspaper articles, books, etc., had 80.6%. Visual ads in magazines, billboards, etc., were the third choice at 69.4%. The order of these was not surprising. The amount of television that society is currently exposed to is alarming. Celebrity and model figures are airbrushed and configured to look a specific way. A slim, toned physique is associated with success. The human brain is trained to believe this, thus it is assumed that one must look this way in order to achieve success.

**Factors affecting body image**

As previously stated, social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) is one explanation for how we develop our personal body image. However, what the study failed to point out was other reasons why our personal body images develop a certain way. The results of this study have shown various other aspects that affect personal body image development.

One of the main factors that affect body image is confidence. It has already been established that the media’s influence on personal body image can affect confidence levels and lead to unhealthy problems. However, there are other factors besides the media that affect individual confidence levels. When the survey results were tallied the most popular choice for what affects confidence levels were other people. This can include family, friends, boyfriends/girlfriends, peers, teachers,
coaches, etc. The list in its entirety can be seen in the results section.

Summary

The findings of this report matched up with those that were found in earlier reports stated in the literature review. The gaps in previous research regarding gender were filled.

Overall, the media has an effect on individual body images, but it is not the only thing to take into consideration. Although the current generation may have a higher exposure rate to the media than generations in the past does not mean that all of the blame can be placed solely on the media. A mental weakness must exist first in order for the mind to be so easily influenced by what is seen and heard. Every individual has the choice to decide what they think should be the healthy ideal. It can change from person to person and the sooner it is accepted, the healthier this generation and generations to follow, will be.

Further Research

Further research can be conducted in a few different areas.

First it would be appropriate to have an even number of males and females to take a survey similar to the one that was distributed for this study.

Another avenue that should be examined is how the media affects different age groups, specifically young children. One limitation to this study is that it only used surveys to gather research information. Case studies would be beneficial when examining specific age groups.

Lastly, another research direction that could be taken is examining what happens after the media has impacted an individual’s view on a healthy body image. What is a healthy body image? It is well known that the media has great influence, but what actions are taken because of it?
References


Appendix A

Idealism: The Search for Perfection

The study being conducted aims to discover information regarding body satisfaction and its connection to the media. This questionnaire will be one of the methods used to generate information that will be analyzed for patterns to create theories. I specifically aim to generate information regarding gender, form of media, extent of media influence, and other factors that influence body image. Although your participation is appreciated, it is completely voluntary and can be denied or aborted at any point in time. The information collected from this questionnaire will be anonymous and completely confidential. If at any point you no longer wish to participate or require further information about the study feel free to contact me. Thank you for your time.

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Survey

1) What is your gender:  Male  Female

2) Have you ever been influenced by the media?  Yes  No

3) Has the media ever influenced your own personal body image?  Yes  No

4) Which form(s) of media impacts your view on a healthy body? Please circle all that apply.
   a) Print (Magazine and newspaper articles, books, etc.)
   b) Visual Ads (In magazines, billboards, etc.)
   c) Television and movies
   d) Radio
   e) Online content

5) Rate how negative or positive you think the media is on the general public.

   1  2  3  4  5  6

   Negative  Positive
6) In what other ways do the media influence your life?

7) How would you rate your confidence level on the following scale?
   1= Not confident at all
   2= A little unconfident
   3= Undecided
   4= Somewhat confident
   5= Extremely confident

8) Describe other factors that influence your confidence level.

9) What level of influence do the media have on your opinions about body image?
   1  2  3  4  5  6
   Low level                             High level

10) How often do you watch television or movies?
    1) Never
    2) Once in awhile (up to 2 hours a day)
    3) Often (3-5 hours a day)
    4) Always (6+ hours a day)