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“Body goals”: Exposure to idealized, popular media images can affect body satisfaction ratings

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Abstract

College students are exposed to media many times throughout their day. Studies have shown that there are many negative correlations between students and their comparison of their bodies to others. In this study, it was tested to see if viewing mass media images for a while can affect the way people rate their body satisfaction and whether or not they would change their body. There were 20 people tested in this study. There were 10 people in the control group, and 10 people in the experimental group. The experimental group was required to watch a slideshow with 4 different pictures of health magazine covers then take a short body satisfaction survey, whereas the control group just completed the survey. It was found that there was no significance between the two groups and their group means were basically the same. Lack of significance could be caused by the small sample size or lack of time spent looking at the media images. This study can be built on in the future to add more people and expand to a more diverse sampling. In general, this study has not compared to other studies on the same topic but the method can be used to form a different study.

Keywords: body satisfaction rating, mass media images

“Body goals”: Exposure to idealized, popular media images can effect body satisfaction ratings

The current climate of mass media in our world today can be nasty. Mass media outlets make sure to portray unrealistic bodies of people by editing and altering them because it seems to be what people like to see. This is harmful because people see so many media images throughout the day on social media outlets like Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, TV, etc. This can lead to people creating their own sense of what the “ideal” body of a person should be. There have been studies on this topic of comparison and body satisfaction, but most of them have been on women. There have been studies done on men as well, and have shown interesting results, but not nearly as many. There has been one common similarity which is the person’s lack of body satisfaction with comparison to others either on the TV, social media, or mass media images.

Extensive research has been done on the topic of body satisfaction in relation to the media in today’s society. Most of the reason for this is because of the fact that social media is an important in almost everyone’s daily lives or they are exposed to it at sometime within their day. Social media is a platform for most organizations, companies, and agencies that allows them to spread their ads and products. Most of these ads and products seem to have a main target audience which includes men and younger adult audiences/adolescents. Adolescents and young adults are in their primal development stage so being exposed to these images sent out by companies and organizations can be either beneficial to their development or harmful. What seems to be more common is the harmful aspects to development because of the fact that they use unrealistic portrayals of people within their ads. Adolescents and young adults see this, and can be influenced by these images. These images of unrealistic ideals shown have an effect on adolescents but most studies have been done on young adults that are in college.

A study done by Harrison (2003) had men and women undergraduates pick out from 9 body shapes of what their idea of an “ideal” woman looked like. They then were given a book that had 3

sections (breast, waist, hips) in which the subject could choose what combination of sizes the “person” in the book would have. Most of the participants formed a body that had a big bust, small waist, and thick hips (Harrison, 2003). This leads to the idea of a “curvaceously thin woman” where they are thought to be thick in the bottom and bust yet thin in the middle (Harrison, 2003). This was found to be a result from social media images which shows that indeed young people are greatly influenced by their thoughts of ideal bodies which come from those media images.

Another study that was similar was done in Australia with college aged women (Harper & Tiggemann, 2008). Within this study the women were presented with magazine images of either thin women, thin women with men, or with no humans. They were then asked to complete a questionnaire to evaluate their self-esteem and body image ratings after viewing whatever images they were assigned to. It was found that those in the groups with thin woman, they rated themselves as lower on the self-esteem scale and body image rating (Harper & Tiggemann, 2008).

Relating even more to this current experiment is data from a previous study done by Riitters (2018). This study looked at correlations between multiple variables relating to social media, mass media images, and body image. It was found that there were strong correlations with body satisfaction ratings and self-esteem ratings, self-esteem rating and changing their body type if they could, self-esteem rating and whether or not they follow people with what they call the “ideal” body, and many others. This can help with the current study because it relates to the current climate at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University. The survey was taken by CSB/SJU students and the experiment will have CSB/SJU students partake in it, so it might more generalizable. These correlations found can lead to more information found within people’s body satisfaction maybe resulting from the influence of mass media.

From these conclusions found in other studies, my predictions for this specific study are similar. My hypothesis is that there will be connections between level of body satisfaction ratings and being

exposed to the magazine images. I think that those in the experimental group that view the thin, idealized photos will rate themselves lower on the satisfaction scales (scores = 6 or below). This is because being exposed to those images can immediately make you feel unhappy with your body and decreases your sense of satisfaction.

Method

Design

I conducted a study of 20 undergraduates at a small liberal arts college. The subjects were randomly assigned to 2 groups by block randomization. Each group consisted of 10 subjects. Of the 2 groups, one was the control group and one was the experimental group. They were tested in an independent-groups, post-test only design.

Participants

Of the participants, 16 were Bennies and 4 were Johnnies. 0 were first-year students, 15 were sophomore students, 5 were junior students, and 0 were senior students that attend the College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University. 16 of the participants were in this study because they had to participate for their Research Methods class. The other 4 were friends that I had asked to be a part of this study.

Materials and Questions

At the start of the survey, the subjects were asked their year in school and gender. After that, this survey included: "Right now, how satisfied am I with my body" and "If I could, I would change my body." 1 being extremely dissatisfied or strongly disagree and 6 being extremely satisfied or strongly agree. The answers to these questions would be added together to get an overall rating of body satisfaction. Lower total ratings (2) equal low body satisfaction and high total ratings (12) equal high body satisfaction.

Subjects assigned to the experimental group were asked to first watch a slideshow with pictures of “idealized” models from magazines. Women were shown covers of women’s magazines whereas men were shown covers of men’s magazines (images were taken off of a google search for women’s/men’s health or beauty magazines). After they were shown the images, they were asked to fill out the same body image satisfaction scale as the control group. Results were analyzed in SPSS.

Results

In SPSS, I first ran a descriptive frequency test to determine the amount of Bennies and Johnnies as well as different class sections. This is reported in the methods section. From this, I ran an independent samples t-test to see if there was an effect of the variables in question. No significance was found (sig.=.793). The range in scores of body satisfaction was from 2 to 10. Group means were as follows: control group = 7.2 (SD=2.39), experimental group = 7.3 (SD=2.11). The mean difference of the group means was -.10.

Discussion

From the results, it can be seen that there are no significant results found within this study. The group means of how people rated their body satisfaction were basically the same. This does not relate to other information found within previous studies. My hypothesis was also not supported because of the fact that there was no significance found. My hypothesis was that there would be a connection between the group the subject was in and what they rated themselves on the satisfaction scale. I predicted that the experimental group would rate lower on the body satisfaction scale because they were viewing pictures of idealized bodies before they took the survey. This was not the case according to my analysis.

Previous studies have shown that there has been a significant causal relationship with viewing images of idealized bodies and the subject’s rating of their body satisfaction. In a study done by Ciesla, Crowther, Myers, and Ridolfi (2011), they found that there was a strong connection with how women

compared themselves to others they saw throughout the day with what their own bodies looked like. With this study though, the women within the study had devices they kept with them at all times where every time the device beeped, they would have to take a survey of how they felt at the moment in relation to rating their bodies with others and how they felt (Ciesla et al., 2011). Their results showed that the women noticed themselves comparing their bodies to images they saw throughout the day and it affected how they felt about themselves.

A similar study to mine was done by Knobloch-Westerwick (2014) that showed that there was a clear relationship with viewing idealized, thin images of women and how a person rated their body satisfaction. This study had a sample size of around 50 college women and they had one baseline survey session followed within the next 5 days by sessions where they were exposed to certain images from magazines that are known for having unrealistic bodies within their pages/covers (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014). The results showed that there was actually an increase in body satisfaction throughout the viewings of images because they stated that the subjects within the study thought that the body of the woman in the picture was attainable and their weight loss tendencies increased (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014). This can be looked at as not good because of the fact that women are looking at the body and thinking they can achieve that look when in reality, it is photo shopped and edited to look that way.

There is no external validity within this study because the subjects were selected in a convenience sample. There was also a small sample size so this cannot be generalizable to the larger population of Bennies and Johnnies. The sampling was not diverse in regards to gender as well.

There was somewhat strong construct validity in the way that people were not confused when they took the survey or watched the slideshow. One downfall of the layout of the study was the fact that the slideshow of pictures needed more pictures added as well as a time limit added to how long the person sees the picture.

This study has no significant effect sizes that were found. There was also not a large enough sample size to give any substantial power therefore this study did not have statistical validity either.

Limitations for my study are clear. There was not a large or diverse enough sample size to get a clear example of how people really felt with themselves in general or after looking at the images. There was a very limited amount of men in the study as well. There could also be an issue with the presentation of pictures that I had the subjects view. I had them view a slideshow that they could scroll through at their own pace. I should have had a preset timer that would change the photo every so often so they had to look at the picture longer. It would have also been a good idea to have more images within the presentation as well.

Future research can look into using this layout for a larger study with a bigger sample. Using this layout could be interesting to see whether or not people are instantly affected by observing idealized bodies in comparison to their own. Using a survey like the one from Riitters (2018) study for after images are viewed would be beneficial to finding more accurate results. Overall, the outlook on comparison of bodies to those in the media can have a large effect on how people view themselves and their ratings of satisfaction. There should also be more work done on how to figure out ways to decrease this effect on people from media images and their ratings of their satisfaction.

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