Media exposure impairs perception of body image

Olesnycky, Olenka1; Asi, Suhair2; Cutrim, Paula1; Hartley, Ludger3; McDonald, Daniel4; Dubois, Russell Heyden5; Rodgers, Rachel5; Lynn, Spencer4

Abstract

Body image concerns have become exceptionally prevalent, impairing women’s ability to correctly identify healthy body weights after media exposure. The purpose of this study was to analyze how women’s perceptions of healthy body types are influenced by the costs of being overweight, the positive valence of being thin, and the extent of internalizing media ideals. Eight computer-generated female body images were created with Body Mass Indices (BMI) ranging from 18 to 35. Participants (16 women 18–22 years old) were asked to rate the images, presented randomly over a series of trials, before and after viewing a webpage of swimsuit advertisements. Participants rated how “typical” the images looked on a scale from 1 (thinnest) to 9 (heaviest). Higher perceived cost of being overweight was associated with rating thinner bodies as more “typical” following the swimsuit advertisements (r = .635, p < .009). Higher perceived benefit of being thin was associated with rating thinner bodies as more “typical” than the normal body after exposure (Rhodes et al.). In more recent studies, Glaubert et al. examined how women from Western cultures cope with both body dissatisfaction and the extent of perceptual exposure to body ideals (Glaubert et al. 2009). This study found that women’s body perceptions were impressionable to these body ideals because higher rates of body dissatisfaction were recorded after media exposure (Glaubert et al.). With consideration to the previous studies on body dissatisfaction and perceptual exposure to body ideals, the purpose of our study was to analyze the extent to which media ideals can impact social norms related to body image, and to examine the influence it has on women’s perceptions of a healthy body weight. Our study also examined how much having this ideal body shown in media would affect their lives. We examined the perceived costs of being overweight and the perceived benefits of being thin.

Introduction

The media is saturated with cultural ideals depicting thinner women as more attractive, more desirable and more successful, which adversely impacts women’s body perception. This phenomenon negatively affects women’s ability to correctly distinguish healthy body weights. In previous studies, Stice et al. examined the effects of body dissatisfaction and how body image distortions cause a person to view their body to be larger than it is in reality (Stice et al. 2002). This study attributed body dissatisfaction to have stemmed from sociocultural pressures like media, family, etc. (Stice et al.). Rhodes et al. took the Stice study further by investigating whether exposure to distorted bodies can change perceptions of attractiveness. In many Western cultures, attractiveness translates to being thin (Rhodes et al. 2005). The study concluded that the most attractive body was thinner than the normal body after exposure (Rhodes et al.). In more recent studies, Glaubert et al. examined how women from Western cultures cope with both body dissatisfaction and the extent of perceptual exposure to body ideals (Glaubert et al. 2009). This study found that women’s body perceptions were impressionable to these body ideals because higher rates of body dissatisfaction were recorded after media exposure (Glaubert et al.). With consideration to the previous studies on body dissatisfaction and perceptual exposure to body ideals, the purpose of our study was to analyze the extent to which media ideals can impact social norms related to body image, and to examine the influence it has on women’s perceptions of a healthy body weight. Our study also examined how much having this ideal body shown in media would affect their lives. We examined the perceived costs of being overweight and the perceived benefits of being thin.

Methods

Each participant was administered a survey with questions falling into eighteen subscales. One subscale looked at the perceived benefits of being thin. This subscale asked the participants to rate how much they agreed with phrases like “If I were thinner I would be happier.” Another subscale looked at the perceived costs of being overweight, and it asked participants to rate phrases like “If I were fatter I would have less friends.”

Eight computer-generated female body images with Body Mass Indices (BMI) ranging from 18 to 35 were created using modelmydiet.com to match that participant’s self-reported personal characteristics, such as hairstyle, color and skin tone.

Figure 1: Example stimuli created according to the participant’s self-described personal characteristics.

Participants viewed these eight stimuli 40 times, in random order, and categorized the stimuli from a scale of 1 to 9, where 1 is thinnest and 9 is heaviest. Participants completed three different runs or trials of the perception-based task. After run 1, participants were primed with a visual search task.

The visual search task was implemented to measure the influence of the idealized body type seen in media on the participant’s overall body image perception. The task forced participants to look carefully through a mock webpage of a Victoria’s Secret catalog with a few pages of swimsuits by asking detailed questions about the bathing suits.

After the priming, the participants completed the same perception-based task during run 2. The ratings of run 1 and 2 were recorded and compared against each other to measure the effects of the priming.

Figure 2: An example of the priming images the participants were exposed to in the visual search task.

Results

From the results obtained from run 1 and run 2 of the perception-based task, a change after the priming was noticed in which stimuli were rated most “typical”.

A correlation in the answers between two subscales of the survey was determined.

Conclusion

The results from this study lean towards the notion that women’s perceptions of body image are influenced by the perceived costs of being overweight. If one believes that social status or approval may decrease if one’s weight increases, then a thinner body type is considered more typical after media exposure; media exposure thus skewing the perception of body images. The positive valence of being thin also influences perception because of the belief that being thin is more attractive and more successful. If perceiving benefits of being thin is correlated with extreme dieting behavior, women exposed to idealized bodies in media may be more likely to engage in unhealthy disordered eating behaviors. The internalizing of beauty and idealistic norms has a negative influence on the way women perceive themselves and others, even computer generated stimuli. These preliminary findings support the correlation between media exposure and skewed body image.

References