Exposure to the Media and its Effect on Social Anxiety in Adolescents

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Abstract

Background: Adolescents are being overexposed by the media to a shift in the body ideal to extensively thinner women and more muscular men. Adolescents frequently report body dissatisfaction following the exposure to idealized media images, which is also correlated with low self-esteem. This has led to a rapid increase in social anxiety and eating disorders.

Methods: Subjects (87 adolescent female and male students, aged 11-13 years old) from a suburban public middle school took a survey consisting of 44 questions covering demographic information, body satisfaction and social anxiety. Individual scores for social anxiety were averaged and cross-examined with each media influence.

Results: Significant influences were movies as a source of fashion (.008), pressure from television to have the perfect body (.003), pressure from television to change appearance (.001), trying to look like people on television (.000), body comparison to television stars (.005), body comparison to athletes in magazines (.003), and trying to look like athletes (.013).

Conclusion: Taken together, these results reveal that there is a significant correlation between social anxiety and media influences on adolescents. These results may help to build on future research of body dissatisfaction in adolescents.

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List of Figures and Tables

Review of Literature

"The perfect body." Twenty-first-century culture has become so consumed with this phrase; however, the irony here is there is no such thing. Regardless, the cognizant minds of adolescents incessantly pick up on and are drawn to the social norms and ideologies that the society portrays. Not all adolescents absorb these standards in the same manner. Therefore, some suffer from a range of psychological symptomology, such as eating disorders, as a result of these "rules" portrayed in the media, and others do not.

Over the last two decades, there has been a substantial transformation in the weight and size of female and male representations throughout the media (Leit et al., 2001; Guillen et al., 1994). This shift in the body ideal has become extensively thinner for women and more muscular for men (Katzmarzyk et al., 2001). For both men and women, the idealized body weighs 15% less than the healthy weight (Martin et al., 2010), which viewers associate happiness, desirability, and success in life with (Tiggeman et al., 2002). On average, adolescents aged 8-18 years old watch up to 4.5 hours of television each day (V.J. Rideout et al., 2010). As a result, adolescents are being overexposed to the unrealistic body ideals portrayed in the media. There is increasing evidence that has suggested children learn from the media that fat is "bad" and thin is "good" (Flanner-Schroeder, 1996). A recent study covered this issue by examining factors that influence body image and strategies to either lose weight or gain muscle. Based on a questionnaire conducted on adolescents aged from 6-12 years old, results indicated that boys were more focused on increasing muscle, whereas girls were more focused on losing weight (McCabe, 2003). And so, these cultural standards, in part, justify why many adolescents become so engrossed

with their body image and experience body dissatisfaction; they serve as an explanation as to why adolescents seek the "perfect body."

Adolescents frequently report body dissatisfaction following the exposure to idealized media images (Labre, 2002). Body dissatisfaction is best defined as the negative evaluation of one's physical body (Stice et al., 2002). Individuals high in body dissatisfaction are reported to also suffer from a low self-esteem as well as depression (Paxton, 2006). Consequently, body dissatisfaction is a common risk factor for the development and maintenance of eating disorders (Cooley et al., 2001). As the media has played a central role in creating and intensifying body dissatisfaction, subsequently, the prevalence of eating disorders has increased. Over the last 50 years, eating disorders have become one of the most common problems encountered by adolescents (Agras, 2001) affecting 7.6% of girls and 2.2% of boys (Götestam et al., 2004). According to the DSM-V, eating disorders are divided into four categories: anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, binge eating disorder, and eating disorders not otherwise specified. Further complicating the issue of eating disturbances is their relationship with other disorders, such as social anxiety.

Social anxiety and eating disorders are greatly related to one another (Levinson et al., 2011). Eating disordered individuals are exceedingly preoccupied with self-presentation and how others perceive and evaluate them. Similarly, social anxiety disorder is defined as the constant concern of how the physical self is viewed by others (H-Streigel-Moore et al., 1993). Social anxiety disorder can be further broken down into social interaction anxiety, fear of scrutiny, fear of negative evaluation, fear of positive evaluation, and social appearance anxiety. Cheri A. Levinson concluded, after conducting a

questionnaire, that there was a significant relationship between social appearance anxiety and fear of negative evaluation with both social anxiety and eating disorders. These results further indicate that there is a link between social anxiety and eating disorders.

Particularly individuals suffering from social anxiety disorder experience heightened apprehension when they enter social situations, which is an indication of poor self-esteem (Gerlach et al., 2004). Consistent with previous research, adolescents with a poorer self-esteem are more likely to be dissatisfied with their bodies (McCabe, 2003) compared to non-anxious youth. They more frequently compare their own bodily appearance to "more attractive" others, which puts them at a greater risk of body dissatisfaction and eating disturbances (Corning, 2006). Understandably, individuals high in social anxiety are going to be more susceptible to the negative impact of the media. Thus, the effect of the thin-deal on self-perception differentiates according to certain mediators, such as pre-existing factors of social anxiety. To build on this idea, a study examined the effect of the threat aroused by differentiated perceptions of thin-ideal images. Results conveyed that women with a lower self-esteem were more sensitive to the media images (Arciszewski, 2011). Building on these findings, future research should include the identification of associations between exposure to the media and aspects of social anxiety in adolescents.

There is no "perfect body." However, the mass media seems to believe so. While the media continues to contribute to the development of weight concerns and body dissatisfaction in adolescents, some are more negatively impacted compared to others. The underlying question remains. Who is more negatively impacted and why?

Research Question and Hypotheses

Research Question

How does exposure to the media affect social anxiety in adolescents aged 11-13 years old?

Hypotheses

H_1: Adolescents who are socially anxious react more negatively to the exposure of the media than those who are not.

H_2: Adolescents who are not socially anxious do not react negatively to the media.

H_0: Adolescents who are socially anxious do not react more negatively to the exposure of the media than those who are not.

Methods

Participants

Participants were 87 adolescent female and male students, aged 11-13 years old, from a public middle school in Westchester County. The students were informed about the project in their health classes. It was highly suggested that they participate in the study as the students were offered 10 bonus points on their grades for participating, but it was still completely up to them whether or not they wanted to participate. It was also stressed to them that the study would remain completely anonymous in a consent form that they took home to get signed by their parents. The consent form described the study and its implications. Only those that brought back a signed consent form in time were able to participate in the study.

Measures

The Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire 3 Revised edition (SATAQ-3R) was used to assess the media as a key variable. The SATAQ-3R is a 38-item scale structured with statements assessing importance, pressures, social comparison, and internalization of the media by participants. It was shortened by removing the subscales for Internalization of Athletes and Awareness. This scale is scored from 1 to 5: definitely disagree, neither disagree nor agree, somewhat agree, and definitely agree. The participant will be told to evaluate the statements. For example, they could be asked whether they definitely disagree, somewhat disagree, neither disagree nor agree, somewhat agree, or definitely agree with the statement that TV commercials are an important source of information about fashion and “being attractive.” Social anxiety was measured using the Social Anxiety Scale for Children and Adolescents. This 20-item scale assesses the way participants had been feeling during the week prior to taking the survey. Scores range from 0-3 not a problem, mild, moderate, and severe. Participants will be told to evaluate

the following statements. For example, they could be presented with “During the past week I have had problems with eating in front of other people,” which they responded with not a problem, mild, moderate, or severe.

Procedure

Permission was granted by two health teachers to conduct this study on their students. Participants were given a brief description on the study and handed out consent forms that were brought home and signed by a guardian. After receiving a sufficient amount of consent forms, students, who were permitted, took a 10-minute survey consisting of 44 questions covering demographic information, body satisfaction, and social anxiety. To avoid any bias, participants were not given any prior information on the topic; however, the teacher later covered the information. The survey remained completely anonymous. Data was collected, with permission of each health teacher, independently that was later analyzed for any statistical significance.

Data Analysis

Each subject’s individual answers were uploaded onto an Excel spreadsheet. This spreadsheet was uploaded onto the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) statistical analysis software. The software took the results and evaluated the frequencies for each question on the survey. It also assessed any correlation between weight and anxiety, and anxiety and med influence through Multivariate ANOVA. When nothing came back significant, average means were calculated for social anxiety. These means were then cross-examined with each individual media influence to determine if there was any significance between specific influences of the media and social anxiety.

Results

Based on each subjects' individual scores, average means were calculated for social anxiety. When these means were cross-examined with each media influence to identify any significant correlation between the two factors, some significance was found. As shown in Figure 1, the influences that came back significant were movies are a source of fashion, pressure from television to have the perfect body, pressure from television to change appearance, trying to look like people on television, body comparison to television stars, body comparison to athletes in magazines, and trying to look like athletes. Those approaching significance include pressure from television to diet, pressure from television to exercise, and body comparison to people in magazines. These results conclude that there is some significant correlation between social anxiety and certain media influences on adolescents. Thus, H_1, which states that adolescents who are socially anxious will react more negatively to the media than those are not, was proven true.

Table 1

ANOVA Table

			Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Commercials are a source for fashion * Anxiety	Between Groups	(Combined)	47.223	26	1.816	1.111	.359
	Within Groups		98.110	60	1.635		
	Total		145.333	86			
Pictures are a source for fashion * Anxiety	Between Groups	(Combined)	41.759	26	1.606	.886	.623
	Within Groups		108.723	60	1.812		
	Total		150.483	86			
Famous people are a source for fashion * Anxiety	Between Groups	(Combined)	64.353	26	2.475	1.436	.125
	Within Groups		103.394	60	1.723		
	Total		167.747	86			
Magazine ads are a source for fashion * Anxiety	Between Groups	(Combined)	53.447	26	2.056	1.460	.115
	Within Groups		84.484	60	1.408		
	Total		137.931	86			
Movies are a source for fashion * Anxiety	Between Groups	(Combined)	66.747	26	2.567	2.151	.008
	Within Groups		71.598	60	1.193		
	Total		138.345	86			
TV pressure to be thin * Anxiety	Between Groups	(Combined)	54.727	26	2.105	1.430	.128
	Within Groups		88.331	60	1.472		
	Total		143.057	86			
TV pressure to have perfect body * Anxiety	Between Groups	(Combined)	96.796	26	3.723	2.385	.003
	Within Groups		93.641	60	1.561		
	Total		190.437	86			
TV pressure to change appearance * Anxiety	Between Groups	(Combined)	71.536	26	2.751	2.659	.001
	Within Groups		62.073	60	1.035		
	Total		133.609	86			
TV pressure to diet * Anxiety	Between Groups	(Combined)	46.822	26	1.801	1.587	.072
	Within Groups		68.098	60	1.135		
	Total		114.920	86			
TV pressure to exercise * Anxiety	Between Groups	(Combined)	63.039	26	2.425	1.533	.088
	Within Groups		94.915	60	1.582		
	Total		157.954	86			
Body comparison to TV * Anxiety	Between Groups	(Combined)	67.468	26	2.595	1.326	.183
	Within Groups		117.452	60	1.958		
	Total		184.920	86			
Body comparison to magazines * Anxiety	Between Groups	(Combined)	52.586	26	2.023	.871	.643
	Within Groups		139.368	60	2.323		
	Total		191.954	86			
Body comparison to movies * Anxiety	Between Groups	(Combined)	47.281	26	1.819	1.048	.427
	Within Groups		104.098	60	1.735		
	Total		151.379	86			
Try to look like people on TV * Anxiety	Between Groups	(Combined)	62.038	26	2.386	3.058	.000
	Within Groups		46.812	60	.780		
	Total		108.851	86			
Body comparison to TV stars * Anxiety	Between Groups	(Combined)	60.097	26	2.311	2.243	.005
	Within Groups		61.834	60	1.031		
	Total		121.931	86			
Body comparison to people in magazines * Anxiety	Between Groups	(Combined)	49.050	26	1.887	1.668	.053
	Within Groups		67.870	60	1.131		
	Total		116.920	86			
Body comparison to athletes in magazines * Anxiety	Between Groups	(Combined)	91.339	26	3.513	2.415	.003
	Within Groups		87.281	60	1.455		
	Total		178.621	86			
Try to look like athletes * Anxiety	Between Groups	(Combined)	82.071	26	3.157	2.024	.013
	Within Groups		93.584	60	1.560		
	Total		175.655	86			
Thin people are better looking * Anxiety	Between Groups	(Combined)	47.640	26	1.832	.965	.524
	Within Groups		113.877	60	1.898		
	Total		161.517	86			

Table 1 displays the average score for social anxiety tested with each individual media influence to determine any significant correlation. $p < .050$

Conclusion

This study tested whether exposure to the media affects social anxiety in adolescents aged 11-13 years old. A majority of the results did not come back significant, including the frequencies, test for a correlation between social anxiety and media, and test for a correlation between weight and social anxiety. The reasons behind this may be due to certain sources of error in the experiment itself. The sample size was much smaller than intended with a total of 87 subjects that were recruited from only one Middle School. Every student was given the opportunity to participate; however, they either forgot to get the consent form signed or his/her parent refused to let the student participate. As a result, the sample size was not large enough to generate significant results. When the subjects were asked to put down their weight, many of them either gave an estimate or range, or left it blank. In future research, subjects from more than one Middle School should be recruited to increase the sample size. Also, if there is not a scale available at the time of the admittance of the survey, weight should not be considered. Aside from these impracticalities, some significance was found when an average mean score for social anxiety was cross-examined with each individual influence of the media. Therefore, it can be deduced that some aspects of the media are more influential when there is a degree of social anxiety.

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