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Effects of Thin-Ideal Media on Body Image: Solomon Four-Group Design

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Introduction

In general, research suggests that exposure to thin-ideal media has a negative effect on the body image of women (e.g., Grabe et al., 2008; Groesz et al., 2002; Stice, 2002), but there are contradictory findings in the empirical literature.

This study addresses two possible reasons for the contradictory findings:

- One possible reason for contradictory findings is that there are inconsistencies across studies with regard to which specific dimension of body image is assessed (Grabe et al., 2008). In our program of research, this methodological problem is addressed by employing a multidimensional assessment of body image.
- Another problem in existing research is the failure to rule out the possibility that pre-to-post changes in body image from exposure to thin-ideal media are at least in part due to pretest sensitization effects of body image measures. Our research program is attempting to identify pretest sensitization effects by utilizing the Solomon Four-Group Design and a post-experimental inquiry, as recommended by Kazdin (1998).

This study examined the following hypotheses:

1. Women's body image will become more negative after viewing thin-ideal media, whereas such a change will not occur in women viewing neutral media.
2. Thin-ideal media will have a negative effect on body image across all dimensions assessed.
3. After controlling for participant reactivity, there will still be evidence of the effect of thin-ideal media on body image.

Procedure

Participants in this study were 112 female undergraduate students. Assessment included measures of seven identified dimensions of body image:

- Body Esteem Scale (Franzoi & Shields, 1984)
- Self-Objectification Questionnaire (Noll & Fredrickson, 1998)
- Brief Eating Beliefs and Behavioral Intentions Scale (created for this study)
- Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire (Heinberg, Thompson, & Stormer, 1995)
- Appearance Self-Efficacy Scale (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2006)
- Physical Appearance State and Trait Anxiety Scale, State Version (Reed, Thompson, Brannick, & Sacco, 1991)
- Positive and Negative Affect Schedule, Negative Affect Scale (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988)

Using the Solomon Four-Group Design, participants were randomly assigned to one of the following four conditions:

- a) pretest assessment of body image, exposure to thin-ideal media, posttest assessment of body image
- b) pretest assessment of body image, exposure to neutral media, posttest assessment of body image
- c) no pretest assessment, exposure to thin-ideal media, posttest assessment of body image
- d) no pretest assessment, exposure to neutral media, posttest assessment of body image

Following posttest body image assessment, participants completed a post-experimental inquiry.

Results

For Hypotheses 1 and 2, there was one dependent variable of body image (i.e., anxiety related to body image) that changed in the expected direction and became more negative after viewing thin-ideal media. As a general summary statement, there was evidence that body image, specifically anxiety regarding physical appearance, increased in participants who viewed thin-ideal media. Results of the post-experimental inquiry revealed that women believed exposure to thin-ideal media had negatively influenced their body image, even though this was not detected by most of the body image measures. In this study, there was limited support for Hypothesis 1, and Hypothesis 2 was not supported. The overall analyses did not find significant differences between the posttests of the four groups, and one would expect to find such differences if pretest sensitization had occurred. However, it was not possible to fully examine Hypothesis 3 in this study, since results were not significant for most body image measures. Finally, the post-experimental inquiry demonstrated that, although a large number of participants were aware of the purpose of the study, this awareness did not appear to influence changes on the body image measures.

Conclusions and Implications

Research suggesting that exposure to thin-idea media has a negative effect on body image is clinically significant because body image disturbances are central to eating disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

In general, the present study shows some limited support for the notion that thin-ideal media negatively influences body image, but more research is needed to examine if such effects are due to pretest sensitization. Regarding the difference between this study and past research (Folger & Reeb, 2010) that found greater evidence of the effect of thin-ideal media on body image, it is suggested that the contradictory findings in literature may be due to methodological variations among studies. This poster encourages further discussion regarding differences among studies examining the influence of thin-ideal media on body image, and plans for future research are part of this discussion. The clinical significance of the issue justifies continued research in this area.

References: See Handout

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