Do Media Affect Self-Esteem Cross Culturally?

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the affect the media has on self-esteem and how self-esteem is affected cross culturally. The Self-Esteem inventory andEDI-2 (eating disorder inventory) will be used on approximately 60 female subjects. The self-esteem assessment will be taken before and after the viewing of a slide show of media images. The results will indicate the affect the media has on self-esteem.

Introduction

African American women have traditionally appeared less affected than do European American women by societal emphasis on thinness. African American women are generally heavier than European Americans (Kumanyika, 1987) but has been recognized as being more satisfied with their bodies (Rucher & Cash, 1992) Rand and Kulda (1990) found that overweight African American women were more likely to report having “no weight problems” than were European Americans of the same weight. African American also has a lower incident of eating disorders (Dolan, 1991). African American women have held more favorable body image beliefs than do Caucasian women. More recently other research has suggested that many African Americans are dissatisfied with their body image. Research is not starting to suggest that thinness is gaining more value within African American culture. Current research conducted among African American have documented that having a less positive body image is associated with having a lower self-esteem (Siegel, Yancey, Aneshensel, Schuler, 1999) The present study examines the association of self-esteem and media as it affects different cultures.

Literature review

Media affect on self-esteem for both African American and Caucasian females

Do the media have a direct effect on female’s self-esteem cross culturally? Previous studies have demonstrated that the media alters female self confidence (Lilly & James) body dissatisfaction (Russell & Cox) and sexual health (Wingood, Diclemente, Harington, and Davies). A number of experiments have been done on the powerful effect the media has on
females. Most people believe that the media has been the primary causal agent for a shift toward thinness (Anderson & Didomenico, 1992). Young women today are comparing themselves to supermodels and playboy centerfolds, with figures, which are thin, tubular, and not the full hour glass (Garner, Morris, Cooper, 1988).

Studies have been conducted on body comparison as it relates to self-esteem. In one study done by Irving (1990), college females were shown a set of slides depicting thin models, average size models, and oversized models. Irving found that those who viewed the thin models had lower overall-self-esteem and body satisfaction with their weight compared to the women who looked at the average and oversized models. The control group’s (no photos) mean self-esteem score was almost equal to subjects that viewed the thin photos. Additionally, the images of average to oversized models enhanced woman feelings about themselves more than looking at thin images decreased their self-regard.

Social comparison can come from the media but it can come from peers as well. Festinger’s (1954) social comparison theory argues that people have a basic need for self-evaluation and they prefer to compare themselves to individuals that are similar to themselves (same age, nationality).

Interesting research on social comparison and body satisfaction was done by Lin, Lilly, Kulik & James (2002). This study randomly selected 67 college females. Each female was led to believe that she would be a participant in a “dating game” scenario. They were told that they would be getting acquainted with an attractive young man. The man they would be getting acquainted with would also get a chance to get acquainted with another female. Afterward, the man would pick which female he would like to date. The 67 females were separated into three groups. The control group did not see any pictures of the other female participant that would be getting acquainted with the same guy they had to get acquainted with. Another group got to see a picture of a thin lady that was going to compete for the guy. The last group got to see a picture with the same ladies face as the previous group but with computer manipulation the woman was overweight. As a result, the group of females that were viewing pictures of a thin lady thought the other lady in the picture body looked better than them and felt that the guy would choose the other female over them. The group that looked at pictures of the overweight females was more confident in their own bodies because of looking at the oversize picture.

Being in a relationship with another individual can affect how people feel about themselves. Culture can define what is accepted by society as well the media (Snooks & Hall, 2002). The media uses images that are either accepted or rejected in part based on an individual’s culture.
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(Snooks & Halls, 2002). Research has been done on the effects the media has on different nationalities. One really study was conducted by Snooks & Hall (2002) which compared body size, body image, and self-esteem among African American, European American, and Mexican American middle class woman. The study examined the influences of ethnicity on weight and body image, as it compares to self-esteem. Results indicated that ethnicity did not play a role in self-esteem but there was a significant difference in the BMI (weight/height ratio) of African American woman compared to European American. African Americans had a higher BMI (weighed more) than European Americans but still their self-esteem was not affected. These findings may lead individuals to believe culture could have more power over the Medias drive for thinness image or that African Americans are less affected by the media (Abood & Chandler, 1997) Research has shown that African Americans that were dissatisfied with their body were because of actual weight problems not societal pressure or media pressure (Abood & Chandler, 1997).

There was a multivariate study that controlled for social economic status which led to no difference in body dissatisfaction and eating disorder behavior between Caucasian American and African American. (Caldwell, Brownell, & Wilfley, 1997) These findings led researchers to believe that the difference between African Americans and European Americans were not due to race, but were due to SES (Social Economic Status). The longer African American students attend predominately Caucasians University and were assimilated, the more they were equally affected by the culture ideal of thinness (Abrams, Allen, & Gray, 1992). The African American ethnic subculture did not protect these women against the socio-cultural factors that fostered body dissatisfaction and eating disorder behavior (Neumark-Sztainer, Downes, Resnick & Blum, 1997). In their research entitled “Body Dissatisfaction, Drive for Thinness, and Self-esteem in African American College females”, James, Phelps & Bross (2001) measured body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness with Caucasian subjects using the EDI-2 (eating disorder inventory) and the MSCS (multidimensional Self-Concept Scale) in comparison to African Americans. The two groups were found to be almost identical. As a result, the eating disorders prevention models that were intended for Caucasian college woman could be equally utilized by African American College students.

Some research supports the theory that there is no difference in the effect the media has on them when it comes to race. Rosenberg (1979) conducted a study on global self-esteem, which demonstrated that minority groups’ value standards of reference for social comparison are typically based on their own minority groups and less on those of the majority culture. Russell & Cox (2003) performed an experiment that assessed the degree to which body-image is related to the constructs of SPA( Social
Physique Anxiety), SPA consist of body dissatisfaction, and self-esteem. Results indicated that African American females had lower SPA and lower body dissatisfaction than Caucasian females and higher global self-esteem than Caucasian females. Weight discrepancy did not predict SPA in African American women; it did predict SPA in Caucasian females (Russell & Cox, 2003). While perceived weight discrepancy was reflective of body dissatisfaction in both groups, this discrepancy was only predictive of SPA and body dissatisfaction for Caucasian (Russell & Cox, 2003).

If African American females have less body dissatisfaction, they are less vulnerable to self-presentation concerns, potentiality because they have not adopted a large cultural stereotypes and internal standard of the ideal body as Caucasian females (Abood & Chandler, 1997). In the body image literature, a common theme for more positive body appraisals of African-Americans is due to the fact that they do not identify as closely with the majority culture, media-model of an ideal body which may afford them a protective effect against negative body dissatisfaction (Flynn & Fitzgibbon, 1998; Ogden & Elder, 1998; Parker at al., 1995).

Previous experimental research indicates that the use of average-size woman models in advertising prevents the well-documented negative effect of thin models on woman’s body image (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2004). It has been said that woman in western culture are socialized into believing their bodies are used to attract others and that they are objects that are looked at and evaluated (Thompson, Heinberg, & Tantleff, 1999). 20% of super models are underweight and 15% of those are placed in the category of underweight constituting a diagnostic criterion for anorexia nervosa (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). While the cultural ideal is becoming progressively thinner, woman’s body weight is increasing (Grogan, 1998). More women are becoming discontent with their body which encourages them to diet and manipulate their body shape (Robin, Silverstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1985). Considering the fact that the ideal body image is getting thinner and woman’s body weight is increasing, there has been an increase in women with low self-esteem, body dissatisfaction and eating disorders (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002).

The thin ideal of women is reinforced by many social influences, but the mass media is described as the loudest and most aggressive purveyors of images and narratives of ideal slender beauty (Groesz et al., 2002). Visual media such as magazines and television seems to have the most effect because the exposure to the images seem unavoidable (Kilbourne, 1999). The issue with the media and thin body image has gotten the attention of the general public. Levels of concern and public debate about whether the use of very thin models in the media has a detrimental effect on women are increasing (Kilbourn, 1999). The UK government held a body image summit in June 2000 to discuss the need for policies
regarding a ban of such media images, and the British Medical Association conclude that the media play a significant role in the etiology of eating disorders (BMA, 2000).

Previous experimental research indicates that the use of average-size models in advertising prevents the well-documented negative effect of thin models on women’s body image, while such advertisements are perceived as equally effective (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2004).

The most remarkable findings in body dissatisfaction research is that currently most women and girls report dissatisfaction with their appearance, the belief that they weigh too much and they are trying to lose weight (Rosen & Gross, 1987; Striegel-Moore, Silberstein & Rodin, 1986). This has been shown repeatedly in survey studies of high school and college students and community sample adults (Rosen & Gross, 1987; Striegel-Moore, Silberstein & Rodin, 1986). Body dissatisfaction is one of the most potent risk factors for eating disturbances (Katzman & Wolchik, 1984; Coric & Murstein, 1993; Striegel-Moore& Fanko, 2002.) Numerous studies confirm that feelings towards one’s own body shape are related to global self-worth, so that lower satisfaction with one's own body is related to lower self-esteem (Franzoi & Shields, 1984; Rosen & Alan, 1986) Body image is important in the development of body self-esteem and consequently global self-esteem because the body is the first thing perceived in the social contact. Research suggests that negative body image is correlated with low self-esteem in adolescent’s girls (Button, Loan, Davies & Sonuga-Barke, 1997).

African American women are demonstrative and favor conveying love through food. Meals and times of breaking bread are avenues of socialization in African American families and communities (Indira D. Tyler, 2003). African American woman reports less concern with body shape, weight, and eating than Caucasian women. This study identifies that African American culture impacts attitudinal concern of body image among African American Woman; African American society is more accepting of large body shapes and less concern with dietary restraints (Pike et al., 2001).

The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education (2002) collects statistics on the number of African Americans enrolled in college. In 1999 there was a total of 1,640,700 African Americans enrolled in college. African Americans represent only eleven percent (11%) of all undergraduate schools.( U. S. Department of Education). Studies have shown that African American woman at predominantly black college are less likely to be diagnosed with eating disorders versus predominately Caucasian universities (Grey et. al., 1987; Williams, 1994). If the African American women surveyed sought to assume the values, attributes, and behavior of their Caucasian peers in order to become an accepted member of the
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culture, in this case the University, than how can a true prevalence of eating disorders among African American subgroup be identified? Further study is needed because more and more African American woman are attending predominately Caucasian Universities. As African Americans enter mainstream American via work and school, the acculturation phenomenon invades the most sacred of African American culture-food (Indira D. Tyler, 2003). Although eating disorders within the African American woman have not reached epidemic proportion; however, the potential is there (Indira D. Tyler, 2003).

Many experimental, correlational, and longitudinal, studies have found the exposure to the thin ideal in the media plays a role in producing distorted body images perceptions, dieting, and eating disorders symptomology in vulnerable women and adolescent girls (e.g., Field, Camago, Taylor, Berkey, & Coldditz, 1999; Harrison & Cantor, 1997; Levine, Smolak, & Hayden, 1994; et. al). One study was conducted on the amount of television watched and magazines read by young girls as it is associated with eating disorder symptomology (Vaughan & Fouts, 2003). The results of the study indicated that changes in eating disorder symptomatology were related to changes in magazine exposure. There was confusion regarding whether this relationship was because increased exposure to magazines lead to increases in symptomatology and/or if increases of symptomatology lead to an increase in reading magazines (Vaughan & Fouts, 2003). A decrease in self-esteem could have led to both increases in symptomatology and magazine exposure. Future research should be conducted to determine the relationship between media and eating disorder issues (e.g., Harrison, 2001; Stice et al., 1994; Stice & Bearman, 2001) Variables that may moderate this relationship should also be examined such as personality characteristics (Fouts & Vaughan, 2003).

**Methods**

The sample size for this study was 58 college students, 26 of whom were non-white. Students were recruited from different campus-based organizations and from psychology classes. Students were the given time and location of the study and provided information online as to when where to meet. Consent forms were used to notify students of the intentions of the study and to obtain permission to utilize them as subjects. For reasons of confidentiality, students did not sign the consent forms, but were given a number on their form and a copy of that form with the same number, which was given to the experimenter.

In this experiment, the female undergraduates took the Self-Esteem Inventory and the EDI-2 (Eating Disorder Inventory, Version 2). After completing the EDI-2, the participants were asked watch a slide show of forty female celebrities. The slides consist of twenty African Americans.
and twenty Caucasian Americans well known in the media. Each slide was shown for five seconds each. When the slide show was over, the participants were asked to take the Self-Esteem Inventory and EDI-2 again. This experiment was set up as a pre post design. The EDI measures eleven different components that are related to self-esteem. This study only used nine of the eleven components in order to avoid diagnosing an eating disorder.

The components that were used in this experiment were: drive for thinness, body dissatisfaction, social insecurity, interpersonal distrust, introspective awareness, asceticism, maturity fears, ineffectiveness and bulimia. These components are measured as they related to different aspect of self-esteem. The EDI-2 is a well know instrument for diagnosing Eating Disorders. The media images were one of the independent variables and the BMI of participants was another. Each participant was measured for height and weight at the end of the experiment. The participants were measured for their BMI to eliminate that confounding variable (a woman that is overweight that believes she is overweight is different than a woman that is already underweight and feels she is overweight).

Results

After completing the study, we found that healthy attitudes towards eating and weight diminished by exposure to media images: \(F=33.2, p<0.0009\), but there was a greater effect of images upon non-white females \(F=6.6, p<0.013\).

<table>
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<th>NATION1</th>
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<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>N</th>
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<td>101.2586</td>
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Healthy Attitudes Concerning Eating & Weight

Eating Disorders Inventory

The Self-Esteem Inventory indicated that in non-white females there was an overall low self esteem but was affected oppositely by Exposure to Media Images: F=5.03, p<0.029

### Descriptive Statistics

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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>93.4746</td>
<td>17.80000</td>
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</table>
The correlation between the media images and the self-esteem indicated the following: Self-Esteem is highly correlated before and after Media Exposure, Self-Esteem is correlated with positive attitudes towards eating & weight both before and after media exposure, and Self-Esteem is *More Highly Correlated* with positive attitudes towards eating & weight after media exposure, *Suggesting a Protective Effect.*
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Correlations

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-Exposure Eating Scores</th>
<th>Post-Exposure Eating Scores</th>
<th>Pre-Exposure Self-Esteem Scores</th>
<th>Post-Exposure Self-Esteem Scores</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
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<td>.372*</td>
<td>.218</td>
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<tr>
<td>Post-Exposure Eating Scores</td>
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<td>1.000</td>
<td>.527*</td>
<td>.614*</td>
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<td>Pre-Exposure Self-Esteem Scores</td>
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<td>.527*</td>
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<td>N 59</td>
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<tr>
<td>Post-Exposure Self-Esteem Scores</td>
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<td>.614*</td>
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* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Discussion

It would be reasonable to say that thin models have less of an effect on lowering self-esteem than do average and oversized models. Women look at average to oversized models as a therapeutic method to enhance their self-esteem. Mainstream media have very little average to oversized models depicted, which may lead to women feeling less confident in themselves. If there were more average to oversized models represented in the mainstream media, women’s self-esteem might increase.

Studies have shown that women that are married or in a relationship may not be as affected by the media because they are already “accepted” by someone. This paper could be expanded to explore how much of a difference it makes if a woman is in a relation. Women that are single may be more likely to compare themselves to models in the mainstream media, compared to those that are married or dating. A strong relationship may decrease the effect the media have on self-esteem.

African American women are affected by the media, but only if their BMI is higher than average. Caucasian women are affected by the media if their BMI is higher or lower than the average. Caucasian women may be more affected by the mainstream media because of the depiction of Caucasian women in the media. African Americans may not only be less affected by the media, but the body image that is depicted in the media of African American women is more obtainable. Ethnicity may not play a role.
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on the Media’s effect, but who they compare themselves to in the media may be a strong factor.

One limitation of this study could be the manner in which weight discrepancy and SPA was measured. A more informative way of gathering the information, such as asking females to compare their current body size to their ideal body size (Stunkard, Sorenson & Schlusinger, 1980), or by asking females what specific body part they were most dissatisfied with (Salusso-Deonier & Schwartzkopf, 1994), might yield different, or more sensitive, results. African American and Caucasian women have different physique appraisal, which results in Caucasian females having higher SPA and African Americans having lower SPA.

I hypothesize that, if African American females in the media were below the mean BMI, then there will be more African American s with higher SPA. African American females base their social comparison on their own minority group (Russell & Cox). It would be interesting to see more African American woman in the media that are below the mean BMI and the effect it would have on the African American female population. Being in a relationship with another individual can affect how people feel about themselves. Culture can define by what the society accepts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our data suggest that under non-challenge conditions white and minority females have comparably healthy attitudes toward eating and weight. However, under challenge conditions (media exposure) minority females demonstrated an even greater vulnerability to eating pathologies and to reductions in their self-esteem. Our divergent data may reflect a more heterogeneous makeup of our minority subject, in terms of ethnicity, and yet a more select set of minority subjects, University students, who are high achieving. High need for achievement has been associated with eating disorders in women.
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References


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