



Original article

The Association Between Exposure to Mass Media and Body Dissatisfaction Among Spanish Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Correlational research has found associations between magazine and television exposure and body dissatisfaction. However, this relation is not direct, and various psychological variables may moderate and/or mediate this relation, such as awareness and internalization of the thin ideals, comparing oneself with ideal body image or self-esteem, as well as the patient's body mass index (BMI). The aim of this study was to assess the association between magazine and television exposure and body dissatisfaction among Spanish adolescents by gender. A second aim was to determine the predictors of body dissatisfaction by gender.

Methods: A cross-sectional national survey of 1,165 Spanish secondary students aged 14 to 16 years was conducted. Frequency exposure and type of TV program/magazine as well as other psychological variables, such as thin-ideal internalization and self-esteem, were associated with high levels of body dissatisfaction (BD) based on a cutoff point of 16 or above on the Eating Disorder Inventory (EDI) by gender. Multiple linear regressions were used to examine associations between body dissatisfaction, mass media topic exposure, BMI, and psychological variables.

Results: Mass media exposure to a specific kind of content, rather than to total exposure frequency, was more associated with body dissatisfaction in females versus males. In males, five factors accounted for 35% of the total variance of body dissatisfaction and were associated with lower TV and magazine exposure to fitness topics and lower self-esteem and with greater BMI, disordered eating behaviors, and awareness of the thin ideal. For females, high body dissatisfaction was associated with greater internalization of the thin ideal, disordered eating behaviors, BMI, and lower self-esteem (54% of total variance explained).

Conclusion: There does not seem to be a clear association between media exposure and body dissatisfaction. Further research is necessary to enhance our understanding of how the media's role affects adolescents' awareness and internalization of the thin ideals, which may in turn lead to the development of body dissatisfaction and unhealthy weight control behaviors.

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Introduction

Body image dissatisfaction seems to be not only a widespread phenomenon among teenage girls (Baile, Raich, & Garrido, 2003; Hill & Pallin, 1998; Neumark-Sztainer, Paxton, Hannan, Haines, & Story, 2006) and among adult women (Jaeger et al., 2002;

Lameiras, Calado, Rodríguez, & Fernández, 2003; Sepulveda, Carrobes, & Gandarillas, 2010; Wiseman, Gray, Mosimann, & Ahrens, 1992), but has also been found to be an independent predictor of disordered eating as reported in several meta-analytic reviews (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Stice, 2002). This association between body dissatisfaction and eating disorders has led to an extensive body of research over the last 20 years that has attempted, among other aims, to address the factors that may contribute to the development of body dissatisfaction, such as the importance of sociocultural influences (Cafri, Yamamiya, Brannick, & Thompson, 2005; Grogan, 2006). More specifically, Cafri et al. (2005) reported the salience of three constructs that seem to be frequently implicated in the development of body

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image dissatisfaction: Awareness of a thin ideal, internalization of a thin ideal, and perceived pressures to be thin. On the other hand, although findings continue to report greater dissatisfaction among women (Knauss, Paxton, & Alsaker, 2007; van den Berg et al., 2007), research that has examined body dissatisfaction and pressure toward thinness has concluded that these associations also seem to be present, albeit less markedly, in male populations (Hatoum & Belle, 2004; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004).

Although sociocultural factors associated with body image are generated by a wide range of socialization agents, such as family, friends, and peers, it seems that the mass media arguably play a decisive role as a vehicle for female body objectification (Wiederman, 2000) through the exposure to consistent, reiterative, and persuasive thin-ideal images (Blaine & McElroy, 2002; Brown & Witherspoon, 2002; Cusumano & Thompson, 1997; Field et al., 1999; Hill, 2006; Hogan & Strasburger, 2008; Wiseman et al., 1992). An example of this phenomenon can be found in the objectification of women's bodies by advertising and consumerist agents who seem to show an interest in sustaining a vicious cycle that both addresses and reinforces the thinness ideal (Blaine & McElroy, 2002; Crandall & Martínez, 1996). In this line, Wolf (1991) argues that beauty ideals are not only subject to changeable definitions, but that the images generated by advertising agencies that strive to engage women in consumptive practices, may also seek to divert their attention from established power structures (Wolf, 1991). Likewise, Ventura (2000) has explored the relationship between women and our current Western standards of beauty. The author found a strong association between beauty, thinness, and health and argued that these categories were usually jointly marketed through the mass media (Ventura, 2000). Thus, it seems that a significant proportion of the general population is led to believe that ideals of beauty and thinness can not only be obtained through the consumption of cosmetic and dietetic products, but that this is also socially acceptable (Castillo, 2006). Women are therefore led to believe that failure to attain these goals is owed to a lack of will or the need to increase goods consumption (Calado, 2010). Thus, it seems that body dissatisfaction and unhealthy weight-control behaviors among women are acquired through social learning and consolidated through cognitive and behavioral processes (Blowers, Loxton, Grady-Flessner, Occhipinti, & Dawe, 2003; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw, & Stein, 1994).

It is, however, debatable whether these forms of mass media imply a cause-and-effect relationship or if they are simply correlation. In any case, the evidence available by correlation studies in the scientific literature reflects a complex reality. The majority of findings provided by correlational research are on the relationship between exposure frequency to the thin ideal and body dissatisfaction (Cusumano & Thompson, 1997; Field et al., 1999; Tiggemann & Pickering, 1996), mainly carried out with magazines (Abrason & Valene, 1991; Botta, 2003; Cusumano & Thompson, 1997; Field et al., 1999; Hatoum & Belle, 2004) and television (Borzekowski, Robinson, & Killen, 2000; Tiggemann & Pickering, 1996; Van den Bulck, 2000) or both types (Harrison, 2000; Harrison & Cantor, 1997). Regarding magazines, Field et al. (1999) analyzed how the consumption of magazines to obtain information on beauty and weight was associated with body dissatisfaction in primary and secondary school students. The study reported that 69% of the students believed that fashion magazine images influenced their concept of ideal body image and that 47% of the students expressed the desire to lose weight

because of this influence. Similarly, in a recent study by Botta (2003), the author found that exposure to sports and fitness magazines was associated with body dissatisfaction in both female and male students. Regarding television exposure, Tiggemann and Pickering (1996) found that female students who spent more time watching films and series and less time watching sports programs presented greater body dissatisfaction. Likewise, Borzekowski et al. (2000) found that exposure to music videos was associated with higher concerns regarding perceived appearance and weight among females. In an adolescent sample, Van den Bulck (2000) reported an association between the exposure to ideal images portrayed on television and the self-assessment of weight and body shape.

On the other hand, it seems that muscle bulk is relevant to the masculine body ideal, and that exposure to the muscular ideal has been associated with greater body dissatisfaction in male adolescents, whereas females have reported the desire to be thinner (Hatoum & Belle, 2004; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004). Hence, it seems that sociocultural factors may affect female and male adolescents differently or, in other words, male adolescents tend to be less likely to engage in weight loss behaviors than females, and are less likely to internalize media body ideals (Knauss et al., 2007).

However, current psychological theories have provided important insight on the impact of ideal body images: Social comparison and the previously mentioned awareness or internalization of the body ideal. Thus, body comparison with media images has been proposed as a mediator between mass media exposure and body dissatisfaction in female samples (van den Berg et al., 2007). On the other hand, it appears that females with less self-esteem were more sensitive to social comparisons (Stice, Spangler, & Agras, 2001) which could possibly lead to greater probabilities of internalizing images of excessively thin women (Stice, 1994).

Nevertheless, it seems that body dissatisfaction and eating disorders, which were normally associated with Western cultures, are now present among women across cultures. Perhaps the most well-known investigation of the impact of mass media exposure is the Fiji islands study, which documented the effect of beauty standards and attitudes associated with body image on the islands' adolescents who had previously not reported these problems (Becker, 2004). The reason for this change could be explained by the recent access on the island at the time to American, British, and Australian television programs. Thus, it seems that, through the mechanics of globalization, Western values regarding body image have been able to permeate the majority of non-Western cultures.

Previous Spanish research in this field has departed from the premise that the Spanish media present similar characteristics to mainstream Western media culture, such as those of the United States and Canada. Spanish television is awash with dubbed American sitcoms, documentaries, and films; rights to successful reality shows, such as *Big Brother* and *American Idol* have been acquired and Spanish versions produced. Likewise, advertising agencies for large corporations, such as *Chanel* or *Nike*, tend to dub and use spots produced and aired in other Western European countries. Furthermore, Spanish adolescents seem to present similar television exposure, around 2 hours daily, to other Western countries (Devis-Devis, Peiro-Velert, Beltran-Carrillo, & Tomas, 2009). Like television, Spanish printed media can also be seen as analogous to Western printed media with magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* or *Elle* that are published in Spanish but follow similar trends in content. Thus, it is not

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