The role of appearance schematicity in the internalization of media appearance ideals: A panel study of preadolescents

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Individuals who are more strongly invested in their appearance, *appearance schematics*, have a tendency to engage in appearance-related comparison. Appearance schematicity consists of two components. The self-evaluative component concerns the degree to which appearance is central to self-worth, referred to as dysfunctional appearance beliefs. Motivational salience refers to the engagement in behaviors designed to enhance appearance, such as body surveillance. Based on a three-wave panel survey of 973 Flemish preadolescents ($M_{age} = 11.15$, $SD = 1.13$) we found that the motivational and self-evaluative components had a different impact on media internalization. For preadolescents who engaged in more body surveillance, watching television resulted in more media internalization. For preadolescents who had fewer dysfunctional appearance beliefs, watching television resulted in more media internalization. These findings suggest that appearance schematicity is an important susceptibility variable in the relationship between TV-exposure and media internalization, and emphasize the importance of investigating individual dispositions beyond gender differences.

Appearance-focused content in entertainment media is pervasive. Virtually every type of media contains messages and/or images that emphasize the body and sex appeal as important determinants of one's value as a person (e.g., Bazzini, Pepper, Swofford, & Cochran, 2015; Flynn, Craig, Anderson, & Holody, 2016; Northup & Liebler, 2010). Perhaps even more concerning is that the body shapes and figures promoted by the media (e.g., thin-ideal models for girls and muscular-ideal models for boys) showcase an ideal that is out of reach to most individuals (Slater, Tiggemann, Hawkins, & Werchon, 2012). Media effects research has revealed that exposure to these ideals can lead to decreased satisfaction with one's own body (Galioto & Crowther, 2013), and to behaviors aimed at meeting the observed media ideal, such as dieting (Knobloch-Westerwick & Crane, 2012) and unhealthy muscularity-related behaviors (Tod, Edwards, & Hall, 2013).

Evidence specifically points to the internalization of media appearance ideals as an important mediator in the relation between media exposure and body image disturbances (Karazsia, van Dulmen, Wong, & Crowther, 2013). Media internalization entails the endorsement of media appearance ideals as well as the adoption of these ideals as a personal goal and standard, and is reflected by individuals' tendency to compare with ideal-images in the media (Thompson & Stice, 2001; Thompson, van den Berg, Roehrig, Guarda, & Heinberg, 2004). Research has consistently shown that adults and (pre)

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adolescents' informational reliance on, commitment to, and comparison with media appearance ideals is positively associated with lower levels of body satisfaction (e.g., Myers & Crowther, 2007) and higher levels of unhealthy body image investment (e.g., drive for muscularity [De Jesus et al., 2015]; drive for thinness [Pritchard & Cramblitt, 2014]).

Yet, despite the fact that all women and men are surrounded by an appearance-focused media environment, their levels of media internalization vary (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008), suggesting that some individuals are more susceptive to this internalization than others. In this context, scholars have suggested that an individual's appearance schematicity may play a role in their internalization of media appearance ideals (e.g., Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2004; Sinton & Birch, 2006). They argued that individuals who are more strongly invested in their appearance, referred to as appearance schematics (Cash, Melnyk, & Hrabosky, 2004), might have a greater tendency to engage in appearance comparisons with media models (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2004). Drawing on these propositions, the current study considered the impact of appearance-related dispositional variables in individuals' responses to media exposure. Based on self-schema theory (Markus, 1977) and Lang's (2006) limited capacity model of motivated mediated message processing (LC4MP), we examine the moderating role of appearance schematicity in the relationship between television exposure and the internalization of media appearance ideals. Following Cash et al. (2004), appearance schematicity was considered to consist of two components: self-evaluative salience and motivational salience. Self-evaluative salience refers to the extent to which people believe that their appearance is an important determinant of their self-worth, peer relationships, and life satisfaction. Motivational salience refers to the motivation invested in maintaining or enhancing one's appearance.

Given the popularity of television among preadolescents (Booker, Skew, Kelly, & Sacker, 2015; Rousseau, Bels, Eggermont, & Van den Bulck, 2015), and the ways in which television can encourage unrealistic appearance standards, we believed it was imperative to understand the influence of television on preadolescents' endorsed appearance ideals. Preadolescence is a particularly apt developmental period in which to study the influence of (mediated) appearance ideals because this is a time in which preadolescents are experiencing impending or current pubertal changes to the body. These changes make issues of body image quite salient (e.g., McCabe, Ricciardelli, & Holt, 2010; de Guzman & Nishina, 2014), and make late childhood and early adolescence critical periods for the onset of body image concerns (Frisén, Lunde, & Berg, 2015). In addition, emerging research has identified media internalization as an important predictor of body image concerns among preadolescent boys and girls (e.g., Evans, Tovée, Boothroyd, & Drewett, 2013; Lawler & Nixon, 2011).

1. Appearance schematicity and media internalization

The impact of media on body image can be analyzed in terms of cognitive-processing models, which state that media content can be processed differently depending on individuals' existing cognitive self-schema (i.e., Clark & Tiggemann, 2007; Ip & Jarry, 2008). Self-schemas are cognitive generalizations about the self that organize, summarize, and explain behavior along a particular dimension (Markus, 1977, p. 75). Based on Markus' concept of self-schema, scholars have argued that individuals also develop an appearance-related self-schema, which contains information about appearance that is relevant to the self (Altabe & Thompson, 1996). While everyone develops an appearance schema, individuals vary in the strength, complexity, and accessibility of this schema (Cash & Labarge, 1996; Markus, Hamill, & Sentis, 1987).

It has been suggested that appearance schematics, or individuals for whom appearance is more crucial to their self-concept, develop a more organized and elaborate appearance schema (Cash & Labarge, 1996). Such schema complexity has been shown to increase schema recall, which, in turn, can result in the schema becoming more accessible, or more cognitively available (Davies, Zhu, & Brantley, 2007; Higgins & Bargh, 1987). Having complex and accessible appearance-related self-schemas relates to cognitive biases, such as paying more attention to appearance-related information, easily encoding and recalling appearance-related information, and readily interpreting ambiguous situations as having appearance implications (Rosser, Moss, & Rumsey, 2010; Williamson, Muller, Reas, & Thaw, 1999 for a review). For instance, appearance schematics are more likely to attend to, and selectively remember, stimuli that are related to physical attractiveness (e.g., Altabe & Thompson, 1996; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2002).

Along these lines, it has been shown that those who are appearance schematics tend more to emphasize appearance information from media, and other sociocultural influences like parents and peers (e.g., Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2002, 2002a; Sinton & Birch, 2006). Most scholars looking at the role of appearance schema in the relationship between ideal-body media exposure and body image have pointed to a temporarily salient, exposure-activated appearance schema as the mediating mechanism that links media exposure to lower levels of body image satisfaction (e.g., Brown & Dittmar, 2005; Dittmar, Halliwell, & Stirling, 2009; Harrison, 2001). These scholars reasoned that ideal-body media exposure primes pre-existing appearance schemas, and that this activation of appearance-related self-schema results in negative body image affect.

Studies have confirmed this mechanism for both the self-evaluative and the motivational component of the appearance schema (e.g., Clark & Tiggemann, 2007; Lin & Reid, 2009). For instance, with respect to self-evaluative appearance investment, Clark and Tiggemann (2007) demonstrated that viewing television triggered preadolescents' belief that self-worth is contingent upon appearance, which, in turn negatively predicted body esteem. For motivational appearance investment, research showed that college students' Facebook involvement positively predicted body surveillance, which, in turn, positively predicted body shame (Manago, Ward, Lemm, Reed, & Seabrook, 2015).