



Exposure to teasing on popular television shows and associations with adolescent body satisfaction



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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study uses a novel mixed methods design to examine the relationship between incidents of teasing in popular television shows and body satisfaction of adolescent viewers.

Methods: Survey data were used to identify 25 favorite television shows in a large population-based sample of Minnesota adolescents (N = 2793, age = 14.4 years). Data from content analysis of teasing incidents in popular shows were linked to adolescent survey data. Linear regression models examined associations between exposure to on-screen teasing in adolescents' own favorite shows and their body satisfaction. Effect modification by adolescent weight status was tested using interaction terms.

Results: Teasing on TV was common, with 3.3 incidents per episode; over one-quarter of teasing was weight/shape-related. Exposure to weight/shape-related teasing ($\beta = -0.43$, $p = 0.008$) and teasing with overweight targets ($\beta = -0.03$, $p = 0.02$) was inversely associated with girls' body satisfaction; no associations were found for boys. Findings were similar regardless of the adolescent viewer's weight status.

Conclusions: Families, health care providers, media literacy programs and the entertainment industry are encouraged to consider the negative effects exposure to weight stigmatization can have on adolescent girls.

1. Introduction

Body image concerns can have a significant impact on the emotional development and well-being of adolescents. Factors such as self-esteem, depression, eating disorders and future weight gain all have been found to be associated with poorer body satisfaction [1–5]. Existing research indicates that many adolescents have low levels of body satisfaction, particularly those who are overweight or obese [3,4,6]. Theorists have proposed a sociocultural model whereby societal ideals of physical attractiveness are transmitted through the population by various channels; these ideals can then be internalized by individuals and result in body satisfaction or dissatisfaction, depending on the extent to which the individual meets those cultural ideals [7,8] and their propensity for comparing themselves to media figures [9,10]. Adolescents are particularly susceptible to social influences [11], highlighting the importance of understanding the social messages to which adolescents are exposed and their role in the development of body satisfaction.

1.1. Media messages about weight

Media is a key channel through which ideals of physical attractiveness are conveyed [8]. According to a 2015 report, adolescents spend an average of 17 h per week watching television (TV) [12], making this format stand out even in a field of new media options. Numerous studies have reported on portrayals of body weight and stigma in media content, finding that overweight individuals are underrepresented on TV shows, are often subject to teasing, are frequently shown eating, and are less likely than thin characters to be considered attractive and popular [13–19]. Our previous study found that among 30 episodes of ten shows identified as favorites by adolescents, half contained at least one weight-stigmatizing incident (with greater prevalence in shows for a youth audience), and these incidents were often used for humorous effect [18].

Research also demonstrates that weight stigma in print and TV advertising is prevalent [20], and its detrimental effect on body satisfaction of viewing idealized figures in advertising is well-established [21–23]. In addition to advertising, studies have also begun to identify

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an association between viewing media content in televised and print sources and distorted body image and disordered eating behaviors, using a variety of observational and experimental research designs [21,24–28]. In particular, recent research examining exposure to reality TV programming focused on weight loss has shown that overweight viewers were more likely to experience lower body satisfaction than their non-overweight counterparts after watching the weight-loss reality show [29]. Cosmetic surgery reality TV viewing similarly contributes to body dissatisfaction and disordered eating attitudes and behaviors [30,31].

Much of the existing research examining media influences on body satisfaction has focused on young women. However, some studies have focused on young men, with a greater focus on muscularity, and have yielded mixed results [10,32–34]. For example, boys who viewed music video clips featuring muscular performers reported lower body satisfaction and more depressive feelings than boys who viewed clips featuring singers of average appearance [32]. In contrast, van den Berg et al. [10] found that media body comparison was a key predictor of body satisfaction in females but not in males [10].

The extant body of work on media and body satisfaction, while informative, is limited in three important ways. First, in spite of their scientific strength, experimental designs in this domain are often artificial; research subjects are shown images out of context that they might not be exposed to in their daily lives. We are not aware of any research that examines more realistic exposure to media content that young people themselves select, where weight-related messages may be incidentally delivered along with plot, characters, and other features that are the primary focus for the viewer (as in a TV show). Second, many studies rely on an individual's recollection of exposure to weight-stigmatizing content, and recall may be strongly confounded with body image (i.e., weight stigmatizing content may be more salient among those with poor body image). Third, research has typically focused narrowly on a single show or specific genres rather than the broad range of TV programming actually consumed by youth.

1.2. Weight teasing and body satisfaction

Weight teasing is common among youth, particularly among those who are overweight; almost 60% of youth classified as having obesity reported weight-based harassment, compared to approximately one-quarter of those who were not overweight [35]. Experiencing weight teasing from family members or peers has been associated with body dissatisfaction, disordered eating behaviors, low self-esteem, depressive symptoms, and suicide involvement in both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies [36–41], with stronger effects found for girls [42]. In addition to interpersonal exchanges, high levels of weight-related teasing in the school environment have been associated with poorer body satisfaction among girls, even after accounting for their own experience of being teased about weight [43]; these findings suggest that socio-environmental messages about weight and shape may be internalized even when they are not directed at the individual.

The theory of Parasocial Interaction posits that children and adolescents may form “pseudo-friendships” with TV characters, look to them as behavioral role models, and be influenced by them as they would by real-life peer interactions [44]. Research has begun to show that this type of one-sided relationship with a media figure is an important mediator between media exposure and body image perceptions in adolescents [45]. Viewing characters' on-screen experiences, such as weight teasing, may therefore be detrimental to the body satisfaction of young people, similar to weight stigma observed in the real world (e.g., in school [43]). Furthermore, research has consistently noted poorer body satisfaction among women and girls and those who are overweight or obese [7]; the strength of media influence may further depend on characteristics of on-screen role models, as young people are more likely to identify with characters who are similar to themselves in terms of gender or other characteristics [46]. For example, the effects of

weight stigma in media may be most pronounced for those who are overweight and most easily able to identify with overweight characters.

The present study builds on prior research about media content and weight-related teasing among adolescents by examining the extent to which exposure to weight-related teasing on favorite TV shows is associated with body satisfaction among viewers. We use a novel design in which adolescents named their favorite TV shows, a sample of these shows was content analyzed for weight teasing and stigmatizing incidents, and unique teasing exposure variables were derived based on each participant's selection of favored shows. This study tests the following hypotheses:

H1. Watching TV shows with more weight teasing will be associated with greater body dissatisfaction among adolescent viewers;

H2. These associations will be stronger for female than male viewers (based on research showing stronger effects among girls), and stronger for overweight viewers than non-overweight (based on theory suggesting overweight viewers will identify more strongly with overweight characters who are often teased).

2. Methods

2.1. EAT 2010: design, survey and measures

EAT 2010 is a cross-sectional, population-based study that examines the eating, physical activity, and weight-related behaviors of adolescents [47]. As part of EAT 2010, 2793 adolescents from 20 middle schools (grades 6–8, mean age = 12.6 years, SD = 0.83) and high schools (grades 9–12, mean age = 15.9, SD = 1.29) in Minneapolis and St. Paul, MN, were surveyed during the 2009–2010 school year. A subsample of 129 students completed the survey on two occasions, one week apart to obtain test-retest reliability statistics. All study procedures were approved by the University of Minnesota's Institutional Review Board and by the research boards of the participating school districts.

Adolescent participants completed the EAT 2010 survey, which included a write-in item asking them to list their three favorite television shows; 2130 participants listed at least one show. The 653 unique titles were ranked by popularity, excluding general topic areas (e.g., sports), networks (e.g., MTV) or shows that did not use a scripted format. The content of the 25 most popular shows was analyzed as described below. Analysis was restricted to 1531 participants who listed at least one show that was among the top 25 most popular (71.9% of those who listed any shows, 54.8% of the total EAT sample). Slightly more than half were female (52.7%), 20.7% were white, and approximately 40% were overweight or obese. Additional characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 1.

The EAT 2010 survey also included items assessing satisfaction with thirteen different body parts and attributes (height, weight, body shape, waist, hips, thighs, stomach, face, body build, shoulders, muscles, chest, overall body fat), modified from an existing scale [48]. Five response options ranged from “very dissatisfied” to “very satisfied,” and responses were summed to create a single scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.95; test-retest $r = 0.65$).

Trained research staff measured adolescents' height and weight using standardized procedures [49]; approximately 2% of participants were missing measured height and weight data, and values were imputed from self-reported survey items. Body mass index (BMI) values were calculated and sex- and age-specific cutoff points used to classify respondents as overweight/obese (≥ 85 th percentile) were based on reference data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention growth tables [50]. Participants self-reported their gender, birthdate (used with survey administration date to calculate age), and ethnicity/race (“Do you think of yourself as 1) white, 2) black or African-American, 3) Hispanic or Latino, 4) Asian-American, 5) Hawaiian or Pacific

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