



## Review article

# The role of media literacy in body dissatisfaction and disordered eating: A systematic review



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## ABSTRACT

This study comprised a systematic review of literature examining empirical relationships between levels of media literacy and body dissatisfaction and disordered eating. The review aimed to integrate research on this topic. Electronic databases were searched for key concepts: media literacy, body dissatisfaction, and disordered eating. Media literacy measures were coded for consistency with media literacy constructs. Sixteen eligible studies were identified. Cross-sectional outcomes depended upon the media literacy construct assessed. Some relationships between high scores on measures consistent with media literacy constructs and low scores on body dissatisfaction and related attitudes were found. Media literacy-based interventions revealed improvements in media literacy constructs realism scepticism, influence of media, and awareness of media motives for profit, and improvements in body-related variables, but not disordered eating. Further research examining relationships between theoretically driven media literacy constructs and body and eating concerns is needed. Recommendations are made for evaluating media literacy-based eating disorder prevention.

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## Introduction

Media literacy (ML) interventions, which aim to enhance participants' ability to access, analyse, evaluate, and create media (Aufderheide & Firestone, 1993), are recommended to develop critical viewing and thinking in order to reduce vulnerability to negative media influences (Strasburger & CCMEC, 2010) and enhance health outcomes (Brown & Bobkowski, 2011). Although ML-based programs are being recommended and implemented to prevent body dissatisfaction and eating disorders (e.g., González, Penelo, Gutiérrez, & Raich, 2011; Wilksch et al., 2015) and cross-sectional research exists that has assessed relationships between an individual's level of ML and body and eating concerns (e.g., Engeln-Maddox & Miller, 2008), the body of research examining empirical relationships between individuals' level of media literacy and body and eating concerns has not been subject to a systematic review. This study aims to (a) review research exploring empirical relationships between an individual's level of ML and level of body and eating concerns (i.e., body image, and body- and disordered eating-related constructs), (b) review changes following ML interventions in participant's ML and body and eating concerns, and (c) integrate the literature into a model of the proposed effects of media literacy on body and eating concerns.

It has been established that media, and particularly advertising, influence attitudes, decision making, and behaviours (Strasburger, Jordan, & Donnerstein, 2010). Depending on its content, media can have harmful consequences, including increased intake of unhealthy food and beverages (Harris, Bargh, & Brownell, 2009; Olafsdottir et al., 2014), experimentation with alcohol and tobacco (Nunez-Smith et al., 2010), violent and aggressive behaviour (Gentile, Coyne, & Walsh, 2011), and, certainly in the short term and possibly in the long term, increased risk for the development of body and eating concerns (Harrison, 2000; Schooler & Trinh, 2011). Specifically, meta-analyses have confirmed that greater exposure to appearance-focused media in experimental and correlational studies is associated with higher levels of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating attitudes and beliefs in vulnerable individuals (Ferguson, 2013; Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Want, 2009).

Rather than relying on legislation to restrict media exposure in order to reduce the negative impact of viewing appearance-ideal images, an alternative approach has been to endeavour to build ML competencies by promoting the development of skills to resist media influence through critical viewing (Hobbs, 1998). Critical viewing is thought to buffer the persuasive influence of media messages (Bergsma & Carney, 2008) by reducing perceived credibility of media messages, thus minimising impact on attitudes and behaviour, thereby leading to better health outcomes (e.g., Pinkleton, Austin, Cohen, Miller, & Fitzgerald, 2007).

## Media Literacy and Body and Eating Concerns

Several types of empirical evidence have led researchers to advocate for ML approaches for preventing body and eating concerns (Levine, 2016; McVey, Tweed, & Blackmore, 2005). First, exposure to thin-ideal media images produces elevated body dissatisfaction (e.g., Grabe et al., 2008), prompting consideration of ways to reduce the influence of media. Findings from qualitative studies have indicated that individuals with positive body image actively filter and reject unrealistic media images to protect their body image (Holmqvist & Frisén, 2012; Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, & Augustus-Horvath, 2010), suggesting that building these skills may have a protective effect. Furthermore, the effective application of ML interventions to health risk behaviours such as substance use and violence (e.g., Fingar & Jolls, 2014; Kupersmidt, Scull, & Benson, 2012) suggests that ML interventions could also help prevent other problems such as body and eating concerns. As a consequence of these findings, ML interventions designed to increase the extent to which participants are media literate, and to thereby prevent body and eating concerns, have been evaluated in controlled studies. The defining features of these "media literacy" interventions have not been clearly specified. However, programs intended to increase ML include content such as raising critical awareness of: examination of positive and negative messages transmitted by media, how media affect people, motivations behind advertising, and ways to respond to media through advocacy. One common feature of these interventions is discussion or demonstration of manipulations used by media to produce flawless and thus, unrealistic human images.

A number of these ML interventions have been found to have positive outcomes for weight and shape concern, thin-ideal internalisation, and risk for disordered eating (González et al., 2011; Mora et al., 2015; Wilksch et al., 2015). However, not all evaluations of ML interventions have assessed the levels of ML of participants at baseline and at post-intervention. Without including actual media literacy assessment it is not possible to quantify the extent to which the intervention effect is a result of an increase in participants' ML rather than some other aspect of intervention involvement (e.g., creating cognitive dissonance or reducing peer pressure to meet appearance ideals).

### Sociocultural Model of Body and Eating Concerns: Role for Media Literacy

Despite recent studies responding to calls to implement ML interventions for body and eating concerns (e.g., González et al., 2011; Wilksch et al., 2015), mechanisms by which ML facilitates change in risk and protective factors for body and eating concerns have not been articulated (Levine & Kelly, 2012). The tripartite influence model, a sociocultural model of the development of body dissatisfaction and eating disorders (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe,

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