



The direct effect of thin ideal focused adult television on young girls' ideal body figure[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The present study tested the direct effect of watching thin ideal focused television aimed at (young) adults on body dissatisfaction in preadolescent girls (9–12 years old). A within-subject design was used in which the girls ($N=60$) were tested three times. They watched three movie clips in random order that were either focused explicitly (thin ideal program) or indirectly (soap opera) on the thin ideal or were neutral in content. Afterwards, they filled out questionnaires concerning their body dissatisfaction. Only older preadolescent girls (11–12 years old) showed greater body dissatisfaction after watching the thin ideal focused television clip than after watching the neutral television clip. After watching thin ideal focused television, they desired a thinner body figure than after watching neutral television. The findings imply that watching (adult) thin ideal television directly affects the ideal body figure in older preadolescent girls.

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Introduction

Ample research showed that exposure to mass media affects the development of body image and eating behavior in children already at a very young age (e.g., Harrison & Hefner, 2006; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2005; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001). Especially young girls are found to be susceptible to thin ideal media negatively affecting body satisfaction and promoting disturbed eating behaviors such as dieting (Clark & Tiggemann, 2008; Moriarty & Harrison, 2008). This is worrisome because body dissatisfaction and dieting are considered core characteristics of eating disorders, such as bulimia and anorexia nervosa (Garfinkel, 2002; Hill, 1993). Furthermore, body dissatisfaction predicted depressive symptoms in early adolescent girls (Rierdan & Koff, 1997). The present study further examined the effects of exposure to thin ideal media by experimentally testing the direct effects of watching thin ideal television on body dissatisfaction in young girls (9–12 years old).

Watching television comprises a large part of children's pastime. Recent numbers show that American children, aged between 2 and 11 years, watch television on average 3 h and 37 min a day (Nielsen Media Research, 2009). In the Netherlands, as many as

17% of the children between 7 and 12 years of age spend more than 2 h a day watching television (Van Strien, Van Niekerk, & Ouwens, 2009). Media aimed at young children contain many thin ideal messages, especially in the form of positive attributions towards thinness and beauty and negative attributions towards overweight and unattractiveness (Herbozo, Tantleff-Dunn, Gokee-Larose, & Thompson, 2004; Klein & Shiffmann, 2005, 2006). However, no direct influence of exposure to appearance-related media on body image was found in very young girls (3–6 years old) in a recent study (Hayes & Tantleff-Dunn, 2010). The authors suggest that the effects of exposure to thin ideal media may become more profound after the age of six.

Besides media aiming at children (i.e., cartoons), young children watch adult targeted television as well (Barradas, Fulton, Blanck, & Huhman, 2007; Paik, 2001; Roberts, Foehr, Rideout, & Brody, 1999). After the age of nine, children become primarily interested in adult targeted media. They learn about social norms, relations, and interactions when watching these programs (Rosengren & Windahl, 1989; Valkenburg & Cantor, 2001). Through their observations of parents and other adults, children receive information about how their bodies should look, how others perceive their bodies, and how they should manage the appearance of their bodies (Lerner & Jovanovic, 1990). This suggests that watching adult television contributes to the sociocognitive development of young children and might perhaps even influence their attitudes and behaviors. Watching alcohol and smoking portrayals in adult movies in childhood was found to be related to alcohol use and smoking initiation

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in children and young adolescents (e.g., Dalton et al., 2003, 2005; Hanewinkel & Sargent, 2009), which supports this assumption. Many adult television programs contain strong thin ideal cues that may affect young girls' body image. When watching these programs, they might feel unable to live up to the unrealistic thinness standards and consequently feel dissatisfied with their own bodies and eventually even attempt to lose weight (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2005). Young girls indeed indicated the media as an important source of information about dieting (Lawrie, Sullivan, Davies, & Hill, 2007; Schur, Sanders, & Steiner, 2000). So, young children watch adult television and may be influenced by what they see because they absorb the 'social' information provided and perhaps even translate this information into attitudes or behaviors. In this regard, it is important to establish the effects of the numerous thin ideal cues that are present in adult television programs on young girls' body image.

A couple of cross-sectional studies examined the relations between television exposure and young girls' body image. Dohnt and Tiggemann (2006a) found a relation between watching music television and dieting awareness in 5–8 year-old girls, but watching music television was not related to body dissatisfaction in this age group. Further, they found that watching appearance related television was related to lower appearance satisfaction in young girls one year later (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006b). Additionally, it was found that higher levels of watching television in general predicted thinner future ideal body figures but not thinner current ideal body figures ideals in 8–9 year-old girls over time (Harrison & Hefner, 2006). Clark and Tiggemann (2006, 2007) found that watching appearance-focused television (adult-targeted) was related to higher body dissatisfaction in pre-adolescent girls (9–12 years old), directly and indirectly through appearance related conversations with their peers. Further, it was found that watching soaps and music television was indirectly related to body dissatisfaction through thin ideal internalization in 7–9 year-old girls (Anschutz, Engels, Van Leeuwe, & Van Strien, 2009). In sum, there is preliminary evidence revealing that thin ideal television exposure is related to body dissatisfaction in young girls.

The present study investigated the direct effects of exposure to thin ideal television, taking into account some shortcomings of the existing literature. First, in the literature we found no previous studies that experimentally tested the direct effects of watching adult targeted thin ideal focused television on body image in young children. In adults and adolescents, experimental studies showed that exposure to thin ideal focused television was directly related to higher body dissatisfaction (Bell, Lawton, & Dittmar, 2007; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2002; Want, Vickers, & Amos, 2009). A limitation of the correlational designs used in previous studies focusing on young girls is that incorrect causal conclusions might be drawn because girls who experience higher body dissatisfaction might be more interested in thin ideal media and therefore watch more thin ideal television. Therefore, it is important to examine whether watching thin ideal focused television directly affects young girls' body image as well. Second, most previous studies did not differentiate between different types of television programs, although thin ideal focused television programs highly differ in the extent to which they refer to the thin ideal. For example, some television shows contain thin ideal characters but do not directly emphasize the thin ideal (i.e., soap opera's or movies). However, other television shows explicitly focus on the thin ideal (i.e., America's Next Top Model or Extreme Make-Over). From an intervention perspective, it is important to establish which types of television shows affect body image in young girls. Television shows with an explicit emphasis on the thin ideal might be more likely to directly affect young girls' body image than solely exposure to thin media models. This assumption was tested in the present study, by comparing the effects of a thin ideal focused program with the effects

of a popular soap opera that contained thin actresses, but had no explicit focus on the thin ideal.

Previously, it was found that maternal influences (weight concern and encouragement to be thin) were stronger for children in late childhood than children in middle childhood (e.g., Anschutz, Kanfers, Van Strien, Vermulst, & Engels, 2009). In this phase, children develop a broader environmental orientation (e.g., Demetriou, 2003) and become more aware of social and cultural norms. They learn that physical appearance plays an important role in interpersonal relations and might even elicit preferential treatment (Lerner & Lerner, 1977; Ramsey & Langlois, 2002; Vannatta, Gartstein, Zeller, & Noll, 2009). In addition, ideal body figures were found to become thinner as age increased in childhood (Brodie, Bagley, & Slade, 1994; Gardner, Sorter, & Friedman, 1997). This might imply that children in late childhood, when they approach adolescence, become more vulnerable to the effects of exposure to thin ideal media on body image. Since not much is known yet about the development of thin ideal media influence in young children, it is important to test age differences when investigating media influence.

The present study investigated the direct effects of watching thin ideal television on young girls' (aged between 9 and 12 years old) body dissatisfaction, using a within-subject design. The effects of watching a television show that explicitly focuses on the thin ideal and a television show that contains thin actresses but does not emphasize the thin ideal were compared to the effects of watching a neutral nature documentary. It was expected that especially exposure to the explicit thin ideal television show is related to higher body dissatisfaction. Furthermore, the effects were expected to be stronger in the older pre-adolescent group (11–12 years old).

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 60 girls from Grades 4 to 6 of three Dutch primary schools in the central, eastern and southern part of the country. In Grade 4 ($n=21$) the mean age (as measured at the first session) of the children was 9.19 years ($SD=0.60$). In Grade 5 ($n=22$), the children had a mean age of 10.05 years ($SD=0.21$). In Grade 6 ($n=17$), the children had a mean age of 11.18 years ($SD=0.39$).

Design

A within-subject design was used in which the girls were tested on three different days. In every session, they watched a 20-min movie clip (random order) that was either explicitly focused on the thin ideal, contained thin models but no explicit reference to the thin ideal or was neutral in content. After every session, the girls' body dissatisfaction was assessed. Power calculations revealed that a minimum of 52 participants per cell is needed in an ANOVA design with 3 three different experimental conditions for 0.80 power to detect a medium effect size (Cohen, 1992).

Procedure

Protocols of the study were approved by the ethics committee of the Faculty of Social Sciences, Radboud University Nijmegen. Eight schools were approached and three schools agreed to participate in the study. After the schools agreed, parents received a letter with detailed information about the study and were asked for consent for their daughter to participate (active informed consent). Parents were explicitly asked not to discuss the information about the study with their children, to keep the girls naïve to the study purpose.

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