Brief research report

An experimental investigation of a psychoeducational strategy designed to reduce men's endorsement of societal ideals of women's attractiveness

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A B S T R A C T

The current study evaluated whether a psychoeducational manipulation, focused on reducing an unrealistic view of women's attractiveness, might affect men's ratings of the attractiveness of females. The participants were 159 male undergraduate students who were randomly assigned to four conditions: psychoeducational message (beauty ideals; marketing strategies) and photo exposure (attractive females; household products). The results indicated that males pre-exposed to attractive female images subsequently evaluated average females as less attractive than those exposed to household products. However, a psychoeducational information condition designed to challenge "beauty ideals" did not reduce the adverse exposure effect and was comparable in effectiveness to the "marketing strategies" manipulation. The limitations of the findings are discussed and avenues for future research in this area offered.

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Introduction

Considerable research attention has been devoted to the development and evaluation of prevention and intervention programs designed to improve women's body satisfaction and reduce eating disorders' symptomatology (Cash & Hrabosky, 2004; Levine & Harrison, 2004). Virtually all of these programs target the individual female, using various approaches, such as psychoeducational, media literacy, dissonance induction, or cognitive-behavioral strategies. One area that has been ignored in this otherwise excellent body of research is the potential importance (for heterosexual women) of men's views of female attractiveness and the need to evaluate strategies to modify men's unrealistic expectations for women's appearance. Specifically, research indicates that men's views of women's attractiveness are quite malleable. Kenrick and Gutierres (1980) asked male college dorm residents to rate the attractiveness of a picture of an average-looking female while viewing a TV program (Charlie's Angels) that starred three very attractive female actors. The picture of the average-looking female was rated significantly lower in attractiveness in this Charlie's Angels condition, when compared to the viewing of another program or a no viewing condition. Kenrick,

Gutierres, and Goldberg (1989) later found that men who were exposed to attractive centerfolds of females rated their current partners' sexual attractiveness significantly lower and expressed less affection toward the partners after the exposure than men who were not exposed to the attractive centerfolds. More recent studies also indicate that women's self-ratings of attractiveness are, at least in part, determined by the reactions and feedback from their romantic partners or women's perceptions of their partner's attractiveness ideals (Tantleff-Dunn & Thompson, 1995; Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999).

To date, there is no research that has specifically evaluated whether or not men's ideals of women's attractiveness can be modified through strategies designed to reduce their internalization of appearance ideals. In a recent study with women, Yamamiya, Cash, Melnyk, Posavac, and Posavac (2005) found that exposure to attractive female media images worsened the state body image of young females, however a psychoeducational information manipulation designed to challenge the endorsement of societal appearance ideals reduced the negative impact of the media exposure. The current study was modeled after the Yamamiya et al. (2005) investigation in several respects and was designed to determine if a psychoeducational strategy would modify the effects of media exposure on males' judgments of females. It was hypothesized that receiving an intervention challenging "beauty ideals" would lead to higher attractiveness ratings of females who were pre-rated as "average" in attractiveness when compared to a control intervention consisting of

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"marketing strategies." We also expected that the beauty ideals manipulation would be more powerful if it were followed by exposure to objectively rated images of "attractive" females, as opposed to control images of "household products." The logic behind this hypothesis was the expectation that men, having received information regarding the artificiality of beauty ideals, then exposed to attractive female images, would use the information to challenge their endorsement and internalization of the attractiveness ideal, leading to a more positive rating of "average" female images. In contrast, we expected that men who did not receive the "beauty ideals" intervention would rate average-looking images of women in a harsher light, having first been exposed to the "attractive" images.

Method

Participants

Participants were 159 undergraduate heterosexual male students at the University of South Florida who were between 18 and 30 years old. They participated in the study in exchange for extra credit points, which could be used in various psychology courses. Of the participants, 57% were Caucasian, 19% were Hispanic/Latino, 11% were African American, 8% were Asian, and 5% were other. The average age of the participants was 19.80 ($SD = 2.06$) and average BMI was 24.90 ($SD = 4.20$). In regard to relationship status, 39% were in a romantic relationship and 61% were not in a committed relationship.

Design overview

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four groups: psychoeducational message (beauty ideals – BI; marketing strategies – MS) and photo condition (attractive females – AF; household products – HP). The four groups and sample sizes were: MS–HP (42), MS–AF (38), BI–HP (40), BI–AF (39). Power for this sample size was .80 to detect a moderate effect size, with alpha set at .05.

Stimuli and materials

Three types of visual stimuli were used. Control exposure stimuli were the slides of various household items including a stapler, an office chair, and a lawn mower. The attractive female exposure stimuli consisted of 10 slides—three Caucasian, three Hispanic, two Asian, and two African-American females—whereas the average female exposure stimuli consisted of 12 slides—five Caucasian, three Hispanic, two Asian, and two African-American females. The pictures were taken from the websites of portfolios of model agencies and picture banks for the public use. The slides contained primarily upper body poses, but some slides were full body. They were pre-rated by a sample of 58 male students. The mean rating of the "Attractive" set was 1.88 whereas that of the "Average" photos was 4.34, using the following scale (*1 = Very Attractive* to *7 = Very Unattractive*). A preliminary analysis was run to equate the estimated age and weight of the females in the slides, regardless of their attractiveness levels. The means of estimated age and weight of "Attractive" set were 2.23 and 3.66, respectively, whereas those of "Average" set were 2.22 and 3.65, respectively, with the response ranges of: 1 = Very Underweight to 7 = Very Overweight for weight and 1 = Under 18 years old, 2 = 18–25 years old, 3 = 26–35 years old, 4 = Over 36 years old for age.

Two audiotapes were used for the message conditions. One was the extension of "artificial beauty" adapted from the Yamamiya et al. (2005) study and first used by Posavac, Posavac, and Weigel (2001) (referred to as "beauty ideals" for the current study). This message argues that media images offer unrealistic and irrelevant standards because the flawless looks are created by professional techniques. The "marketing strategies" condition was adapted from Perner (2005), with some minor changes and additions of words to equate the word length with the "beauty ideals." This audio described the types of psychological approaches marketers use to persuade consumers. This message was selected because the thrust of the message (persuasion by the media) was similar in tone to the "beauty ideals" condition. The two transcripts were equivalent in word length (1033 words for marketing information and 1038 words for beauty ideals information) and the audio was voiced for both messages by the same male.

Measures

The Male Internalization of the Female-Ideal Questionnaire (MIFIQ)

This scale was an adapted version of the Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Scale-3: Internalization subscale (Thompson, van den Berg, Roehrig, Guarda, & Heinberg, 2004) consisting of 24 items that measured the extent to which males internalize the sociocultural *female attractiveness* ideal, compare *females* to the ideal, and wish *females* to look like the ideal. The internal consistency of the MIFIQ with the current sample was .95. Higher scores indicated a higher level of internalization.

The Appearance Schemas Inventory-Revised (Cash, Melnyk, & Hrabosky, 2004)

The ASI-R is a 20-item scale that taps into core beliefs and assumptions that a respondent has regarding the importance, meaning, and effects of one's appearance in his/her life, as well as the motivational salience of being attractive and managing one's appearance. It had an internal consistency of .90 with the current sample. Higher scores indicated a higher level of schematicity.

The Message Rating Form (MRF)

This was adapted from the scale developed and used in the Sperry, Thompson, and Vandello (2005) study, with a slight modification in words and five additional questions. The measure asks participants to (1) rate the quality of the audiotaped information in terms of believability, effectiveness, ease of understanding, relevance, persuasiveness, and influence, and (2) answer five multiple-choice questions regarding the content of audiotaped information.

The Rating Scale (RS)

This scale is a three-item measure that assesses the rating of photo stimuli (females, products) in terms of attractiveness, likeability, and desirability. Two of the three items are identical regardless of the type of stimuli (e.g., "Please rate the visual appeal of the model's fashion/the product"), but the last item for the slides of fashion models requires the participants to rate the extent to which they would like the model's fashion for their significant other whereas the one for the slides of everyday products asks them to rate the extent to which they would like the product for themselves. This scale was used to focus the participants' attention on the exposure stimuli and sell the cover story for the study, but the ratings were not analyzed.

The Rating Scale of Romantic Relationship (RSRR)

This scale provided the ratings used to determine the differential effectiveness of the conditions on the ratings of the average-looking female images. It includes three ratings: physical attractiveness, sexual desirability, and a wish to date the female in the slide. The items were highly intercorrelated (.78–.85).