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The Need for Media Regulation Policies on Body Matters

Abstract: In contemporary societies media have been accused of eating disorders development, especially among young women, due to the stereotyped representation on thin bodies in advertising and to contents designed to promote thin body types within female audiences.

A polemic question has been set forth, focusing on whether media body representations should be regulated, for an affirmative answer would imply dominant media power that is not consensual among authors. Due to the lack of consensus around issues of regulating media or promoting self-regulation on body representations, strong measures are yet to be taken by governments. Concerns focus on a twofold problem: obesity and eating disorders associated to excessive weight loss.

Therefore, and departing from an analysis of media regulation experiences and policies in different countries around Europe, the aim of this research is to test media's role in adolescents' body image in order to assess the need for regulation within body related contents in media.

Methods include testing media role in teenage girls' body image self-evaluation and investment in a cross-sectional study with 625 girls. Results point to moderate media impacts on teenage girls' body image with implications for media regulation.

Key words: *regulation policies, media, body image, teenagers*

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Potreba za politikom medijske regulacije o pitanjima vezanim za ljudsko tijelo

Apstrakt: U savremenim društvima mediji se optužuju za povećanje broja slučajeva poremećaja u ishrani, posebno među mladim ženama, zbog stereotipnog prikazivanja mršavih tijela u oglašavanju i za sadržaje stvorene za reklamiranje mršavih tijela kod ženske publike.

Polemično pitanje je postavljeno, s naglaskom na to da li medijski prikazi tijela trebaju biti regulisani, a potvrđan odgovor bi podrazumijevao dominantnu medijsku moć koja nije konsenzualna među autorima. Zbog nedostatka konsenzusa oko pitanja regulisanja medija ili unaprjeđivanja samoregulacije na prikazima tijela, vlade tek treba da preduzmu snažnije mjere. Zabrinutost se usredsređuje na dvostrukom problemu: gojaznosti i poremećaju u ishrani povezanih sa prekomjernim gubitkom težine.

Dakle, polazeći od analize iskustava medijskih propisa i politike u različitim zemljama širom Evrope, cilj ovog istraživanja je da ispita ulogu medija o slici koju adolescenti imaju o svom tijelu u cilju procjene potreba za regulisanjem unutar sadržaja u medijima povezanih sa pitanjima tijela.

Metode uključuju ispitivanje uloge medija u predstavi samovrednovanja koje o svom tijelu imaju tinejdžerke kroz presjek studije rađene sa 625 djevojaka. Rezultati ukazuju na umjeren medijski uticaj na predstavu tinejdžerke o svom tijelu, što implicira neophodnu medijsku regulaciju.

Ključne riječi: *regulativna politika, mediji, slika (predstava) o tijelu, tinejdžeri*

Introduction

Overtime media have been charged on the development of eating disorders in the capitalist world, due to the stereotyped representation of thin bodies in advertising and contents directed to female audiences designed to obtain the same thin body.

From this scenario arises the problem of media regulation within body representations. The major concern resides in two opposite areas but stand on the same issue: on the one hand obesity and, on the other hand, eating disorders associated to weight loss. It is a paradox because media, through advertising, may either be held responsible for inciting both the consumption of unhealthy food, rich in calories and leading to weight gain, as well as to achieve of an ideally thin body.

As Kaufman refers (*in* Strasburg, 1995, p. 75), there are „two sets of conflicting messages. One suggests we eat in such a way that it is almost sure we will gain weight; the other suggests we struggle in order to stay thin”.

The polemic is hence whether media body representation should be regulated. An affirmative answer would imply media power to an extent which is not consensual. In this study we refer to media *impacts* and not to *effects*. Apart from media theories point to this concept (*see* Severin & Tankard, 2001) it is difficult to point out cause-effect relationships in this context. This derives from the contingency of other variables, as well as from the constant media influence along life.

Therefore this study aims at testing media role in teenager girls' body image in order to realize the need to regulate media in body matters. We depart from analysing regulation experiences in different western countries and subsequently test media relevance in adolescents' body image self-evaluation and investment.

Media regulation experiences

Especially over the last three decades, debates on models weight have been occupying media space in different countries, as the deaths by anorexia in Brazil and France, for example, become known. These debates have reached governmental sphere and distinctive experiences and perspectives on media regulation within body representations have been reported.

We analysed main reports promoted by governmental institutions, as: a) the platform for Action on women and the media – PAMM, developed from the 4th United Nations World Conference on Women, that took place in China in 1995 (United Nations, 1995); b) the Body Image Summit, organized in 2000 between the British Government and British Medical Association (BMA) and the report that followed (BMA, 2003); c) the project „Youngsters, Media and Personal Relationships” conducted between 2001 and 2003 and supported by the *Advertising Standards Authority*, the *British Board of Film Classification*, the *Broadcasting Standards Commission* and the *Independent Television Commission* (Buckingham e Bragg, 2003); and finally the report on youth image in television advertising, developed by a research

team from the Navarra University for Navarra's Audiovisual Council („Comunidad Foral de Navarra”) (Bringué, Navas & Arando, 2005).

The first, PAMM, on the relation between Women and Media (*United Nations*, 1995, point 236) stands for the alteration of „the continuous projection of negative and degrading images of women in media communications”. In the next point (237) it is stated that „self-regulatory mechanisms for media must be created and strengthened developing approaches to eliminate gender biased programs”. Therefore, it establishes concrete actions for Governments so as to ensure female participation and stereotype free representations. Media and advertising organizations should (*United Nations*, 1995, point 244):

„Develop, consistently with freedom of expression, professional guides and conduct codes, as well as other forms of self-regulation to promote the presentation of non-stereotyped images of women”.¹

From the English Body Image Summit arose the idea that the government was not yet ready to regulate fashion and magazine industries and dictate minimum model sizes, but it was intended to stimulate the debate and to reflect women concerns. In order to strengthen the discussion, BMA developed a report on teenagers' health (BMA, 2003). Several subjects were included, namely nutrition, exercise and obesity, with relevance to the growing prevalence of weight excess: „in 1998, over a fifth of youngsters between 13 and 16 years old in England were overweight or obese” (BMA, 2003, 1). Recent data show that „Obesity prevalence increased from 1995 to 2007 from 3.1% to 6.9% among boys, and 5.2% to 7.4% among girls.” (Stamatakiset al., 2010, p.167).

On the other hand, the BMA report mentions that it's important not to contribute to an unnecessary anxiety: „several studies on children and teenagers have shown that a considerable proportion is unsatisfied with their size and body shape (...) a significant amount without excessive weight was trying to lose weight” (BMA, 2003, p. 7). It is also highlighted (*idem*, p. 47) that:

„Media have an important role to play, informing teenagers' attitudes towards nutrition, exercise and the misuse of substances (...). So as to protect teenagers, BMA also recommended that broadcasters should adopt a more responsible approach towards body image and healthy food patterns”.

The project „Youth, Media and Personal Relationships” (Buckingham & Bragg, 2003) stands out the problem of regulation policies, as „there is no clearly defined consensus on moral issues (...) an increasing political compromise with freedom of expression principles”. Analysing these statements it is noticeably difficult to promote restrictive measures towards media and instead the choice has been for parental usage regulation. In this case media only inform of age adequacy for viewers and it would be up to parents to allow viewing or reading, which is clearly insuffi-

1 Following this program BFPA - Beijing Platform of Action was created (http://www.unwomen.org/~media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/pfa_e_final_web.pdfconsulted April 2015. In 2005 BFPA was reviewed on future strategies for the advancement and empowerment of women and girls (*United Nations*, 2005).

cient when it comes to adolescents.

Finally, we analysed the study of youth image in television advertising in Navarra (Bringué, Navas, Arndo, 2005), which specifically highlights the body image issue. The legal framework of EU regarding advertising is established with only generic recommendations towards the protection of children, and conclusions remark that

„1. The persistency of television advertising in youth and physical attractiveness may be harmful (...); 2. There is the danger of television advertising producing dissatisfaction in audiences with hazardous effects (...); 3. Television advertising received without critical judgement leads young public to a vital superficiality based on stereotypes” (Bringué, Navas, Arndo, 2005, p.113). The report ends with the recommendation that „6. There should be a commitment between social agents to act conjointly and control values that are now seriously gathered in conveyed messages” (idem, p. 114).

In the portuguese case, for exemple, and even within the EU, the legislation is vague: the Advertising Code, Law 32/2003 from 22nd Aug., art. 24 „Limits to programming freedom”, n. 1 states that

„all elements of program services should respect, in what concerns presentation and content, human dignity, fundamental rights and free personality formation of children and adolescents”.

In 2005 the APAN Code of good practices for minors in commercial communication was published.² Even though it encourages self-regulation mechanisms, together with family and scholar education for the decoding of advertising messages, it mentions nothing in particular regarding body representation in advertising.

From all the above analysed experiences it is possible to understand that the regulation type depends on the adopted perspective regarding media effects, with misleading and inconclusive results (Buckingham & Bragg, 2003).

Therefore in this article we intend to understand media role in self-assessment and investment in teenage girls’ body image so as to set forth the need for media regulation in body matters.

Assim, neste estudo procuramos perceber qual o papel dos media na auto avaliação e investimento na imagem corporal das adolescentes para depois perceber da sua necessidade de regulação em assuntos corporais.

Methodology

The research design for this study is cross-sectional, with a survey that on the one hand considers media influence, namely from the advertisements in female magazines and, on the other hand, body image.

The defined universe consisted of female teenagers from secondary public schools in Sintra, which is the administrative region with more youngsters in Por-

2 (APAN – Portuguese Association of Announcers: http://www.apan.pt/media/16963/codigo_menores.pdf consulted April 2015)

tugal. Girls were then the 10th and the 12th grade (average age=16,34, SD=1.15).

Sampling procedures included the random selection of two classes per year in each school (n=625). Considering the random cluster sample calculation (Siera Bravo, 1991, p. 213), for a confidence level of 95,5% the sampling error was +/- 0,16. Data was analysed with SPSS. In order to test media influence on body image comparing with other variables we departed from the two dimensions in the concept of body image identified by Morrison, Kalin and Morrison (2004): self-assessment and investment.

The model for regression analysis involved a set of variables defined as independent towards two sets of dependent variables:

Body image investment: weight loss behaviours, where we find Extreme behaviours: fastening, smoking, quick dieting, diuretics, *vomiting*, *slimming pills* and *laxatives* – pathogenic weight loss behaviours (Morrison, Kalin & Morrison, 2004); Non-extreme behaviours: diets and exercise, the most frequent (Bissell, 2004, Harrison & Fredickson, 2003) and drinking lots of water, skipping meals and counting calories. The EAT – Eating Attitudes Test scores were also used in the model because this is probably the most standardized measure of symptoms and concerns for eating disorders, especially after its use in the *National Eating Disorders Screening program* developed in the United States in 1998³

Body Image Self-evaluation – variables that measure body satisfaction, using both a pictorial scale and the EDI subscale – *Eating Disorders Inventory*: a psychometric instrument that assesses attitudes towards eating, the body and psychological issues usually attributed to eating disorders (Garner, 1993).

The set of independent variables includes: a) socio demographical (age, religion, geographical origin, school parent level and parent profession and situation towards dating; b) social comparison, which is defined as the type of feeling of the teenager towards herself and peers (Milkie 1999, Botta 1999); c) third person effect – if as references move away from the self the importance of magazines increases (Milkie, 1999); d) self-esteem, using *SES – Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale* (Rosenberg, 1989); e) female press influence, measured with: *SATAQ-3 – Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Scale*: validated by Thompson *et al.* in 2004⁴ (includes three subscales to assess general and athletic thin-ideal internalization, media pressures and media as information and comparison sources; f) magazine consumption, crossing exposure indicators for three levels: high, medium and low (Harrison 2000, Harrison & Cantor 1997, Morry & Staska 2001); thin body ideal: scale used to assess teenage girls attitudes towards the thin body (Botta, 1999); physiological, given by BMI – Body Mass Index: for World Health Organization (WHO) it is possible to classify population bodies as underweight, normal range, overweight and obese from the equation $BMI=W/H^2$.⁵ We therefore worked with four gradings accordingly: Thin, Normal, Overweight and Obese).

3 <http://www.eat-26.com>, consulted April, 2015.

4 in <http://www.jeatdisord.com/content/1/1/14>, consulted April, 2015.

5 http://www.who.int/bmi/index.jsp?introPage=intro_3.html, consulted April, 2015.

We considered the model for explaining the variance (R^2), in face of a more significant model (ANOVA, if $p < .001$ for Fisher (F)).

Results

In table 1 the model includes comparison, magazine consumption, pressures and IMC. In terms of non-extreme behaviours the same predictors emerged. There are differences for EAT-26 scores with two socio-demographical variables: school parent level and parent profession. Another two variables are repeated: magazine consumption and social comparison.

In general, in terms of body image investment magazine consumption and social comparison with magazine models are common denominators.

Table 1 – Regression analysis for body image investment (* $p < .001$)

| Dependent variables | F(p)* | R ² | Predictors | B | EP B | t(p)* |
|------------------------|-------|----------------|--------------------------|-----|------|-------|
| Extreme behaviours | .000 | .89 | Social comparison | .27 | .06 | .000 |
| | | | Magazine consumption | .19 | .05 | .000 |
| | | | Pressures (SATAQ) | .27 | .05 | .000 |
| | | | BMI levels | .22 | .06 | .000 |
| Non-extreme behaviours | .000 | .89 | Magazine consumption | .28 | .05 | .000 |
| | | | Pressures (SATAQ) | .27 | .04 | .000 |
| | | | BMI levels | .25 | .05 | .000 |
| | | | Comparison (SATAQ) | .18 | .04 | .000 |
| EAT-26 Pontuação | .000 | .97 | Consumo de revistas | .22 | .03 | .000 |
| | | | Sentimento de comparação | .25 | .02 | .000 |
| | | | Nível de escolaridade | .27 | .03 | .000 |
| | | | Agrupamento profissional | .21 | .02 | .000 |

In table 2 main predictors for body satisfaction are magazine consumption, social comparison, origin and third person. As shown in other studies ethnic origin is a determinant in body image evaluation. For example, afro American women are less pervasive to western thin body ideals (Botta, 2000, Harrison & Fredickson, 2003). In this research body image self-evaluation are predicted by social comparison and magazine consumption.

Table 2 – Regression analysis for body image self-evaluation (*p<.001)

| Dependent variables | F(p)* | R ² | Predictors | B | EP B | t(p)* |
|--------------------------|-------|----------------|--------------------------|------|------|-------|
| Body Satisfaction (Pic.) | .000 | .87 | Consumo de revistas | .28 | .06 | .000 |
| | | | Social comparison | .26 | .04 | .000 |
| | | | Origin | .28 | .07 | .000 |
| | | | Third person | .16 | .04 | .000 |
| Body Satisfaction (EDI) | .000 | .90 | Comparison (SATAQ) | .55 | .05 | .000 |
| | | | BMI levels | .29 | .05 | .000 |
| | | | Social comparison | .12 | .04 | .000 |
| Weight self-evaluation | .000 | .95 | Magazine consumption | .44 | .06 | .000 |
| | | | Scholar parent level | .53 | .05 | .000 |
| | | | Parent profession | .37 | .04 | .000 |
| | | | Information | .20 | .04 | .000 |
| | | | BMI levels | -.24 | .05 | .000 |
| Self-esteem | .000 | .89 | Comparison (SATAQ) | .51 | .05 | .000 |
| | | | Parent profession | .14 | .04 | .000 |
| | | | Situation towards dating | .13 | .03 | .000 |
| | | | Thin body ideal | .16 | .04 | .000 |

Discussion and Conclusions

In this study we argue that media influence teenage girls' body image self-evaluation and investment. As for the type of influence, we prefer to consider a *negotiated media influence*. Although some studies (eg. Wykes, Gunter, 2005) claim for an insufficient media power, we should keep in mind that media coexist with other social pressures. For example „the shopping mall is since the beginning in a symbiotic relationship with mass media: (...) it supplies the accessories for a lifestyle displayed in the media and (...) the shopping mall sign systems (...) are mere extensions of the advertising content that is portrayed elsewhere, as in magazines, television, newspapers and so on” (Adams, 1992:131).

Therefore, media representations are reflected and repeated in society. We also argue that media influence is revealed in media consumption, but especially via social comparison with models. From this standpoint the idea of a moderate media influence and not as much a direct impact becomes reinforced. It can be translated into a homogeneous and patterned construction of the female body representations, which in turn are reinforcing and being strengthened by the sociocultural context in which girls construct their identities, through comparison mechanisms.

Practical conclusions that we may withdraw are for a) a direct intervention with teenage girls and b) media regulation. Departing from a scenario of negative body image self-evaluation and thin body investments aiming at weight loss the development of a social intervention during adolescence becomes important. This intervention should aim at deconstructing the ideal body type conveyed by media: „in this changing period (...) it is possible to lead youngsters into reflecting over the sense and the significance of these transformations, worries and choices” (Silva, 1999:130). Teenagers should be lead into improving the construction of their body image, for example by deconstructing media visual messages. A well succeeded intervention was based on a program defying media pressures acceptance by explaining the artifices of beauty images (Thompson, Heinberg, 1999).

A counter-current of positive information may and should act through media as well as through other communication channels, as support groups, teachers and parents. This information should enable the prevention of harmful behaviours that result from internalizing media images and, on the other hand, could warn viewers about marketing strategies.

On the main goal of this research concerning media regulation policies, it is our opinion that in face of results on media influence protective measure should be adopted. It is our belief that cause-effect relationships need not be proven in order to protect adolescents. This protection may be developed by the control of positive thin body images and by motivating advertisers, announcers and communication groups to diversify portrayed body types. More contributes could be of help in the option for media regulation or self-regulation, in an area that has increasingly arisen greater concerns.

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