

2008

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Recommended Citation

Devlin, Jessie; Ross, Lindsay; and Kotchick, Beth A. (2008) "Body dissatisfaction and self-esteem among male college students," *Modern Psychological Studies*: Vol. 13 : No. 2 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholar.utc.edu/mps/vol13/iss2/9>

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Body Dissatisfaction and Self-Esteem Among Male College Students

The purpose of this study was to examine self-esteem, exposure to the media's portrayal of the ideal male body, and athletic standing of college-aged men in relation to body dissatisfaction. College men ($N = 100$) were surveyed on these variables. It was hypothesized that males with greater body dissatisfaction would have lower levels of self-esteem. Further, it was expected that males who were more frequently exposed to the body ideal would have higher levels of body dissatisfaction, and that males who do not participate in a college sport would have higher levels of body dissatisfaction than those who do. Results show a significant relationship between body dissatisfaction and self-esteem, such that high levels of body dissatisfaction are associated with low levels of self-esteem. A positive correlation was found between exposure to the media ideal and levels of body dissatisfaction, such that increased exposure was associated with high levels of body dissatisfaction. No significant correlation was found between athletic status and body dissatisfaction. Results of the current study add to previous literature, as well as focus on the college-aged male population.

Many researchers agree that body dissatisfaction as well as other weight and shape concerns have become more prevalent among adolescent boys and adult males in recent years (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004). Though the majority of research has examined the issue of body dissatisfaction in women, image concerns are increasingly common among males. While many females strive to achieve a thin physique, males differ in their opinions of the perfect body. "It is estimated that about a third of males desire a thinner body size while another third desire a larger and more muscular body" (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004, p. 606). In desiring a different body shape, the experience of body dissatisfaction in males may have an effect on levels of self-esteem.

Recent studies have examined the relation between body shape dissatisfaction and self-esteem. Body dissatisfaction, in this case, refers to one's level of contentment with one's body weight and shape (Cooper, Taylor, Cooper, & Fairburn, 1987). Self-esteem refers to one's favorable or unfavorable attitude towards the self (Rosenberg, 1965). For example, a study examining body image and associated psychological traits in college-aged men tested the hypothesis that there is a negative correlation between self-esteem and body dissatisfaction (Olivardia, Pope, Borowiecki, & Cohane, 2004). Through assessment of 154 male college students, Olivardia et al. (2004) found that self-esteem was significantly negatively correlated

with several body dissatisfaction variables such as muscle belittlement, fatness, and eating disorder symptoms. Further, research by Russell (2002) examined males who experienced high levels of body dissatisfaction. Males who reported feeling too thin also reported low self-esteem, depression, and social adjustment problems (Russell, 2002). Failure to achieve the ideal male body is associated with low self-esteem in both men and women, according to research by Bezner, Adams, and Steinhart (1997).

One of the most influential factors on body dissatisfaction and self-esteem is the media. The media of modern society places a tremendous emphasis on the importance of achieving the ideal body size and shape (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004). Our culture is highly aware of the negative effects of exposure to the body ideal in television, magazines, and movies. Several studies have examined this concept. In a study of women's exposure to the thin ideal media image, college women viewed photographs featuring either neutral images or images of thin female bodies. Exposure to the thin ideal images significantly contributed to body dissatisfaction and decreased self-esteem (Hawkins, Richards, Granley, & Stein, 2004). Although there is less focus on the male's ideal figure and its representation in the media, men feel similar pressures and are influenced in similar ways by this ideal (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004).

Recently, there has been growth in the interest of male weight and shape concerns, as portrayals of the male body ideal in popular magazines and films has increased (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004). The male ideal, characterized by a muscular, physically-fit representation of the body, is regularly featured in magazines, television, and advertisements, and, like the female body ideal, is often physiologically unattainable. According to the research, the body ideal may be unattainable without the use of drugs such as anabolic steroids (Leit, Gray, & Pope 2002).

Frequent exposure to this ideal body image contributes to the development of increased levels of body dissatisfaction. Leit et al. (2002) hypothesized that exposure to the male body ideal increases body dissatisfaction. College-aged males were shown

either "neutral" slides that did not focus on the human body or neutral slides combined with magazine and catalog advertisements featuring images of the ideal male body. The results of the study indicated that the men who were shown the combination of slides reported higher levels of body dissatisfaction. As such, frequent exposure to the male body ideal in the media may lead to higher levels of body dissatisfaction and lower levels of self-esteem among males, just as it has been found to do so among women (Hawkins et al., 2004).

Studies have shown that increased exposure to the media ideal may induce males to participate in sports (Parks & Read, 1997). By participating in organized athletics, men hope to achieve a more masculine physique, whether it be a leaner body or a more muscular and solid body. When asked why they join sports teams, males have stated that weight control, fitness, attractiveness, and tone are among their top reasons (Parks & Read, 1997). In a study by Parks and Read (1997), male football players reported more positive responses for body satisfaction and more positive attitudes towards eating and weight control than non-athletes.

In reviewing the available psychological literature, it is evident that a negative correlation exists between level of body dissatisfaction and self-esteem for both men and women. In addition, previous studies have shown that exposure to the body ideal in the media affects levels of satisfaction with one's body, and subsequently, levels of self-esteem. This study will focus on these ideas in a similar manner, paying specific attention to college-aged males. It is hypothesized that males with greater body dissatisfaction will have lower levels of self-esteem. Further, it is expected that males who are more frequently exposed to the body ideal will have higher levels of body dissatisfaction, and that males who do not participate in a college sport will have higher levels of body dissatisfaction than those who do participate in a college sport.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 100 male students from a private Jesuit college in the mid-Atlantic region of

the United States. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 22, with 55% freshmen, 20% sophomores, 19% juniors, and 6% seniors. The sample was primarily Caucasian (84%), with 6% African American, 5% Latino, and 5% reporting of other ethnicities. Fifty-eight percent of these males reported participation in an intramural, club, or varsity college sport, while the other 42% reported no participant in a college sport.

Materials

The Body Shape Questionnaire: Revised, Short Form (BSQ-R; Cooper, Taylor, Cooper, & Fairburn, 1987). The 10-item short form of the BSQ was used to measure levels of dissatisfaction with body shape. Participants were asked to respond to a variety of questions pertaining to their thoughts and experiences concerning body shape and body image. Samples of these questions include, "Have you felt ashamed of your body?" and "Has seeing thin people made you feel badly about your body?" Participants rated their agreement with each item on a 6-point Likert-type scale, with higher scores indicating higher levels of dissatisfaction with one's body shape. The BSQ has been compared to the Eating Disorder Inventory (EDI) and Eating Attitudes Test (EAT) to test its validity, with results indicating a high concurrent validity; for example, a sample of college students with bulimia nervosa yielded a correlation of .35 between the BSQ and the EDI, and a correlation of .66 between the BSQ and the EAT. A second sample consisting of non-eating disordered students produced a Pearson's correlation of .61 between the BSQ and the EDI. The BSQ-R yields similar correlations of the BSQ to the EAT (Evans & Dolan, 1993). Further, the coefficient for test-retest reliability was found to be .88, $p < .001$, with significant reliability coefficients all items of the BSQ (Rosen, Jones, Ramirez, & Waxman, 1995).

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES; Rosenberg, 1965). The SES consists of 10 questions rated on a 4-point Likert-type scale with a score range from 10 to 40. Participants were asked to respond to a number of negative and positive statements. Samples of these statements include, "At times I think I am no good at all" and "I feel that I'm

a person of worth." A 4-point response signifies strong agreement while a 1-point response signifies strong disagreement; some items were reversed scored so that high scores on the SES indicate high levels of self-esteem. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale has good reliability, with test-retest correlations ranging from .82 to .88. Furthermore, Cronbach's alpha for various samples is in the range of .77 to .88 (The Morris Rosenberg Foundation, 2006). The validity of the SES has been questioned, however, as the scale has been criticized for not effectively measuring global self-esteem, as it claims to measure. Further, response bias is common in participants taking the SES, and this significantly impacts the scale's validity (Tomas & Oliver, 1999).

Media Exposure Evaluation (MEE). This 5-item survey was created by the researchers to measure amount of exposure to the media's portrayal of the ideal male body. This 4-point Likert-type scale asked men to rate how frequently they were exposed to magazines, television shows, and other forms of media depicting the ideal male body. High scores on the Media Exposure Evaluation indicate more frequent exposure to the media ideal (Refer to Appendix 1). As this survey had not been used prior to this research, its reliability and validity are not known.

Athletic Status. Respondents were asked whether or not they were involved in an organized college sport.

Procedure

As part of an undergraduate research methods course project, we gathered our participants by going to the location where we believed them to be. In this case, we went to the largest dining hall on campus at 6:30 PM on a weekday and randomly chose 100 males to participate in our study. We approached different tables and informed them that we were conducting a study for our research methods class. They were each given an informed consent paper explaining the procedure. Those who chose to participate were asked to give their signature as proof of their consent and returned the form to the researchers prior to receiving the surveys. Participants were then given the four surveys to complete. Personal information, aside

from year in school and ethnicity was not recorded, thus allowing each male to complete the surveys more openly. The males were given thirty minutes to complete the surveys and were asked to return them to the researchers upon completion.

Results

Table 1 reports means and standard deviations of the primary variables, SES, MEE, and BSQ. There was a significant negative correlation between levels of body-dissatisfaction and levels of self-esteem, $r(98) = -.360, p < .05$. The correlation between self-esteem and exposure to the media ideal was positive and approached significance, $r(98) = .184, p = .067$. The scores of athletes versus non-athletes on the BSQ are provided in Table 2. An independent samples *t* test, found no significant difference between the two groups in terms of body dissatisfaction, $t(98) = -.430, p > .05$.

Discussion

This study measured levels of body dissatisfaction, levels of self-esteem, and amount of exposure to the media's representation of the male body ideal among college-aged male athletes and non-athletes. It was hypothesized that males with greater body dissatisfaction would have lower levels of self-esteem. Further, it was expected that males who were more frequently exposed to the body ideal would have higher levels of body dissatisfaction, and that males who do not participate in a college sport would have higher levels of body dissatisfaction than those who do.

Results of this study show that a significant negative correlation exists between levels of body dissatisfaction and levels of self-esteem, such that high levels of body dissatisfaction are associated with low levels of self-esteem. A positive correlation exists between levels of body dissatisfaction and levels of exposure to the male ideal in the media. This correlation approaches significance, such that more frequent exposure to the media ideal is associated with high levels of body dissatisfaction. Contrary to the third hypothesis, however, no

significant correlation was found between levels of body dissatisfaction and athletic status.

Findings from this study confirm past research regarding body dissatisfaction and self-esteem. Specifically, the current study supported research done by Olivardia et al. (2004), who found a significant negative correlation between several body dissatisfaction variables and self-esteem. Because the present study was conducted at a college where fitness and appearance play an important role in social relations and activities, it is possible that those who experience feelings of body dissatisfaction may also face social challenges resulting in low levels of self-esteem. Due to the social atmosphere that college presents, another likely explanation for the relationship between the variables may be that one who is dissatisfied with his or her body may feel less confident, and thus, may be less likely to engage in self-esteem raising activities.

This study confirms the research of Leit et al. (2002), who found that increased exposure to the male body ideal in the media is associated with higher levels of body dissatisfaction. Media plays an important role in our society, especially among youth. Men experience pressure from the movies, television, books, and magazines to achieve a more masculine, muscular physique. This study reinforces previous literature by focusing specifically on the college-aged male population.

This study did not support the research of Parks and Read (1997), who found that male athletes reported less body dissatisfaction than did non-athletes. Several methodological explanations can be given for the lack of correlation between body dissatisfaction and athletic status. In general, the male athletes who participated in the current study were surveyed in the presence of other male athletes, as teams sat together in the dining hall. As a result, the males discussed the surveys and were influenced by one another to answer in a certain way. Feelings of embarrassment may have prevented the athletes from answering honestly. Additionally, the present study only assessed whether males were on a formal athletic team. It is possible that the non-athletes, those who do not participate in an organized sport, are still conscious of his fitness and health. As a result, these "non-

athletes” could have been as athletic as the reported athletes, but simply do not participate in a college sport. All of these reasons could explain why no significant relationship was found between athletic status and body dissatisfaction. Furthermore, males may choose to participate in college sports because they experience body dissatisfaction. In a study by Kilpatrick, Hebert, and Bartholomew (2005), researchers compared gender differences in physical activity motivation. Males reported higher levels of motivation than did women for social recognition and muscle and strength enhancement (Kilpatrick et al., 2005). Through participating in a sport, it is possible that males may believe they will achieve a more muscular, fit physique, and thus, will be less likely to feel dissatisfied with his body.

Extensive research has been done on body dissatisfaction and its effects on the female population. There is less focus on the issue of body dissatisfaction of males. Because of the limited previous research, this study adds knowledge about the image concerns of males and how these issues impact self-esteem. Further research on this topic may give a more detailed understanding of the reasons for and results of body dissatisfaction in males. Additionally, this study may have important implications for college administrators. It is important for college faculty to recognize the problem of body dissatisfaction and its relation to self-esteem in males. With this knowledge, administrators can work with males who experience body dissatisfaction and show them that they can still fit in socially.

To further this research, it would be desirable to explore potential factors other than media exposure and athletic status that may impact levels of body dissatisfaction among young men. A wealth of research exists concerning both internal and external factors that may influence female body dissatisfaction. Researchers have examined social relations, family history, and environment in relation to body dissatisfaction of females. Because there is a lack of previous research regarding male body dissatisfaction and these variables, it may be beneficial to focus on these issues for the male population. Additional knowledge in this area may

lead to a better understanding of society’s general concern with body image.

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Table 1

Reported Means and Standard Deviations for SES, MEE, and BSQ

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
SES	33.81	5.47
MEE	17.31	3.00
BSQ	20.16	9.51

Note. SES = Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. MEE = Exposure to the Media Ideal.

BSQ = Body Shape Questionnaire

Table 2

BSQ Scores of Athletes versus Non-Athletes

Standing	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Athlete	19.81	10.23
Non-Athlete	20.64	8.52

Note. Total sample: $N=100$. Athlete group: $n=58$. Non-athlete group: $n=42$.

BSQ = Body Shape Questionnaire

Appendix

Media Exposure Evaluation

Please respond to each statement by circling the number that best describes how frequently you are exposed to the various media.

- 1- No exposure
- 2- Rarely exposed (one per month or less)
- 3- Often exposed (at least once per week)
- 4- Frequently exposed (at least once per day)

1. Fitness Magazines

1	2	3	4
No exposure	Rarely exposed	Often exposed	Frequently exposed

2. Playgirl Magazines (or magazines of a similar kind)

1	2	3	4
No exposure	Rarely exposed	Often exposed	Frequently exposed

3. MTV

1	2	3	4
No exposure	Rarely exposed	Often exposed	Frequently exposed

4. Sports Channels

1	2	3	4
No exposure	Rarely exposed	Often exposed	Frequently exposed

5. Action Movies Featuring Male Hero

1	2	3	4
No exposure	Rarely exposed	Often exposed	Frequently exposed

6. Commercials Featuring Diet Pills, Weight Loss Programs, or Exercise Equipment

1	2	3	4
No exposure	Rarely exposed	Often exposed	Frequently exposed